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Human mobility and development: emerging trends and new opportunities for partnerships

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MIGRATION AND FAMILIES¹

Background paper

Introduction

Family migration is estimated to be the main and largest channel of entry for migrants, accounting for almost 50 percent of international migration flows in countries Members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)². Family reunification has been proven to strengthen migrants' contribution to development by increasing their well-being, promoting their personal development and ultimately improving their social integration. Despite this evidence, family migration and its impact on the family unit as a whole, as well as on development, have not yet received the attention they deserve from academics and policymakers.

Through migration, families improve their income, increase their access to education and health, and are generally able to provide better prospects for their children. That notwithstanding, the reality of migration today can pose serious challenges to the family and have a potentially negative impact on the well-being of its members and on development in general. The situation of migrants and families living in settings marked by conflict, economic setback and acute and prolonged periods of unemployment is particularly challenging. The poor, children, young people and the elderly are particularly vulnerable in these contexts. Although it has been acknowledged that policies are at their most effective when targeting the family unit and its dynamic as a whole, migration research and policy attention currently tends to focus predominantly on individuals rather than on the family as a unit.

The United Nations General Assembly has recognized the crucial role of the family in fostering human development and has called for due consideration to be given to promoting family policy development when setting the post-2015 development agenda. The twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, celebrated in 2014, provided an opportunity to reiterate the need for increased cooperation on family issues at all levels and to implement effective, family-oriented national policies, strategies and programmes³.

¹ The topic of this workshop was selected by IOM membership. This workshop is the second in a series, the first workshop "South-South Migration: Partnering Strategically for Development" took place on 24 and 25 March 2014. Please see: <http://www.iom.int/cms/idmsouthsouthmigration>

² OECD's International Migration Outlook 2010 estimates family migration to be the main category of entry, accounting for 36 per cent of migration flows (45 per cent if accompanying family of workers are included).

³ United Nations General Assembly resolution on preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family (A/C.3/68/L.16.).

This background paper considers how migration trends impact the family unit by focusing on vulnerable family members – children, the elderly and youth – and drawing attention to policy areas that require further attention. It discusses protection challenges facing families involved in migration and addresses the psychosocial impact of migration on members of the family who are most susceptible and at greatest risk. Lastly, it highlights the multiple roles youth have on family migration and draws attention to policy challenges in this regard.

Realities of family-related migration – a gender-based perspective

Migration of families is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of socio-economic factors and mobility scenarios in all regions of the world. People generally migrate to seek better job opportunities and to provide adequate nutrition, housing, healthcare and education for their families. In this context, several types of family migration occur: accompanying or dependent family members entering with the primary migrant; family reunification, in which spouses, children and in some cases other relatives, migrate to join an immigrant; and family formation, whereby a citizen marries a foreigner. Families also often migrate in order to escape violent conflict, ethnic persecution and natural disasters.

Economic, social, demographic and political developments drive important dynamics in family migration. Along with the migration of children and youth, female migration continues to account for a significant proportion of family migration. In 2013 women comprised 48 per cent of the international migrant stock worldwide. Although male migrants were seen to be the main economic players of the family until the 1980s, over the past decade perceptions have changed. Women's role in the family, community and workplace is changing, and they are increasingly recognized as key economic decision makers.

A notable proportion of female migration occurs through marriage. This is a common trend in East Asia: in 2008, Taiwan registered 20–32 per cent of marriages as international and in the Republic of Korea and Japan more than 42 per cent of incoming migration results from marriage. Scandinavian countries are also facing increased marriage migration⁴. More and better opportunities for women in the labour market drive migration for family formation purposes. In some countries, marriage migration is also encouraged to redress imbalances in the population sex ratio, while other governments promote international marriages to tackle depopulation and rural exodus.⁵

The global care chain, or global care drain⁶, is a twenty-first century pattern of female migration, which has major implications for gender and family relations. Mostly present in the high and middle income countries, this trend reflects an unmet demand for care, driven by factors including changes in the social status of women, migration, the reluctance of local populations to take on low-paid and low-skilled domestic jobs, or simply by changes occurring in countries' traditional culture. Commonly perceived to be a family's prime nurturers and care givers, women represent very often the most suitable and the only available candidates for foreign domestic and care jobs – they have natural nurturing skills, they are in search for labour opportunities and thus are willing to quickly take on care-giving responsibilities.⁷ In the absence of their wives, mothers, daughters and sisters families left behind are themselves often in need of care and in turn call upon the assistance of relatives or foreign caregivers. The global care chain thus continues.

Contemporary family migration trends have significant consequences for the family structure and relationships of the family, and as described above, growing feminization of migration is an important

⁴ Migration Outlook, OECD, 2012

⁵ Seoul et. al (2006) in Hye-kyung Lee *Family migration issues in the East Asian region*.

⁶ The term was coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 2002 to describe women's migration as a loss for families remaining in the country of origin.

⁷ Uncovering the interfaces between Gender, Family, Migration and Development: The Global Care Economy and Chain, Background paper for roundtable discussion 2.2, GFMD 2010

trend in this sense. Yet, the role of men in family migration, both as a traditional category of migrants or more recently as those left behind, has equally significant implications for the family and for society. Migration of men improves the family's well-being and empowers women, who in the absence of their husbands take on (more) decision making roles. However, migration of men can often translate into vulnerable situations for the family, additional workload for women and children, financial hardship, conflict and even break up the family altogether⁸⁹. Similarly, male migrants may be just as vulnerable as other family members are when facing migration-related challenges. Furthermore, studies show that women's migration can seriously alter men's traditional role in the family and society, with severe repercussions for their health and well-being. This in turn has an impact on the health and well-being of the rest of the family. Gender is thus a key determinant of family migration, which helps to explain the causes, processes and consequences of family mobility. For this reason, migration policy and research can no longer afford to be gender neutral and must include all gender perspectives.

While evolving family migration trends will continue to transform the traditional concept of family and fragment the family unit, the concept of the family is beginning to assume a transnational nature, which makes it central to the international migration debate.

Challenges posed by family migration

Migration of families poses significant socio-economic challenges, since it may put family members in vulnerable situations with risks of abuse, abandonment and exposure to exploitation. This is particularly true for migrants with irregular status, who are often denied access to support and protection services. Throughout the world, millions of children migrate every year; some within their countries of origin and some across international borders. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently estimated that 33 million international migrants are below the age of 20; among them 11 million are aged between 15 and 19, and 9 million are between 10 and 14 years of age.¹⁰

Unaccompanied migrant children have become part of global and mixed migration flows throughout the world. The statistical data available is scattered and unreliable, and the evolving complex and multidimensional aspects of child migration are not well known. There is no homogeneous profile of migrant children: they may be accompanied, separated or alone, and may be of varied ages. Boys and girls alike migrate and do so both through irregular and regular tracks. They may be born in countries of transit or destination, or fall victim to trafficking or sale, or they may be asylum-seekers or refugees, children who left voluntarily or children seeking family reunification.

The reasons why children move on their own are complex and include persecution and conflict, failing States, natural disasters and environmental change, violence and abuse in the home or at school (or the threat thereof), cultural practices such as arranged or forced marriages, lack of employment or education at home and the resulting belief in real or perceived economic opportunities elsewhere. The child's age and development, as well as the conditions of the journey, influence the level of risk for the child concerned. On the other hand, children's mobility can provide opportunities for personal development. The problem is therefore not necessarily that children move, but rather the vulnerability they face when doing so. The lack of a regular means of migration may lead them to depend on smugglers or other unscrupulous intermediaries and to engage in risky trajectories with limited access to protection services. Children with irregular status also face challenges related to access to basic

⁸Dr. Ranjana Kumari. Director, CSR, India, Prof. Ishrat Shamim. Director, CWCS, Bangladesh (2007), *Gender Dimensions of International Migration from Bangladesh and India: Socio Economic Impact on Families Left Behind*

⁹ Brenda Yeoh, Lan Anh Hoang and Theodora Lam (2010), *Effects of International Migration on Families Left Behind*, Civil Society Days, Global Forum on Migration and Development, Mexico.

¹⁰ *International Migration, Children and Adolescents. Population dynamics*, UNICEF, 2013
[http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Population_Dynamics_and_Migration\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Population_Dynamics_and_Migration(1).pdf)

services, such as education and health care.¹¹

Children who are unaccompanied or separated from their families are particularly at risk in places of immigration detention, and are often deprived of their fundamental human rights. Several experts have indicated that these detention centres can have long-term mental and physical health implications for children, even when used only for very short periods of time.

In 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that, as a general rule, unaccompanied migrant children should not be detained, since alternatives to detention exist. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child only allows for detention as a last resort.¹² Detention of children cannot be justified solely by their immigration status or the fact that they are unaccompanied or separated.¹³ The Convention also provides that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration. This includes with regard to the separation of children from their parents or guardians.¹⁴ Given the detrimental effects that detention and family separation have been shown to have on children, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on States parties to the Convention to "expeditiously and completely cease the detention of children on the basis of their immigration status."¹⁵

Effective and humane approaches to migration management exist, which allow States to achieve their policy goals without harming the health and well-being of children and their families, or violating children's rights. In order to prevent unnecessary detention, particularly when dealing with children and families, it is fundamental to build trust, respect and value the dignity of the child, and guarantee fair and transparent processes.¹⁶

Family reunification and integration of migrants

The right to family reunification is recognized in several international instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, as well as in regional legal instruments, such as Directive 2003/86 of the Council of the European Union¹⁷ establishing the right to family reunification for third-country nationals. It is generally acknowledged that while some States perceive family reunification as critical for promoting integration, others are more restrictive. Family reunification accounts for a large share – more than 50 per cent in some States – of legal migration. While many family reunification policies have changed over the past 10 years it appears that the majority remain restrictive when it comes to eligibility for core family reunification¹⁸. These include strengthened income requirements, pre-entry tests, raised or introduced age limits and procedural and/or financial thresholds. They can also be related to fees and visas and include changes in the definition of "family". The reasons for such restrictive procedures are usually linked to States' concerns about abuses of the family reunification system, including through sham and forced marriages, as well as concerns about the integration potential of family members in the country of settlement and their

¹¹ IOM/Eurasylum: MIGRATION POLICY PRACTICE. Vol. III, Number 6, December 2013–January 2014

¹² Human Rights Council, 13th Sess., Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Chairperson-Rapporteur: El Hadji Malick Sow, A/HRC/13/30 (Jan. 15, 2010) at pp. 24-25, paras 58-61.

¹³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 9.

¹⁴ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 3(1).

¹⁵ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Report of the 2012 Day of General Discussion: The Rights of All Children in the Context of International Migration*, 78-79, available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/discussion2012/2012CRC_DGDChildrens_Rights_International_Migration.pdf.

¹⁶ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Report of the 2012 Day of General Discussion: The Rights of All Children in the Context of International Migration*, 16-18, available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/discussion2012/2012CRC_DGDChildrens_Rights_International_Migration.pdf.

¹⁷ Council of the European Union Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification *OJ L 251, 3.10.2003, p. 12–18*

¹⁸ OECD Migration Outlook 2012, Migration policy developments, page 97-121.

ability to contribute to the local economy. As a result, a significant drop has been noted in the number of family reunification applications approved and permits granted. Policies in support of family reunification, family unity or care and empowerment of the family remaining in the countries of origin are still rare, particularly in the case of temporary and circular migration. However, more favourable family reunification rules are foreseen for the families of highly qualified workers.¹⁹

Strict family reunification policies can also be the result of family unity not yet being generally acknowledged in migration policies, which tend to ignore the fact that migrants whose families are close by and who enjoy services that respect family rights in their country of destination are often recognized as being healthier and more productive and thus make a greater contribution to development in their country of destination than those who remain separated from their families.

Challenges associated with the costly consequences of long-term family separation and harsh and restrictive family reunification policies have significant implications for migrants and their human development. Studies have shown that, while it is difficult to measure whether family reunification has facilitated or hindered the integration of migrants, it is clear that successful integration is determined by a number of factors including, among others, the economic situation in the host country, discrimination, and the attitude of immigration authorities. It is strongly believed that restrictions on the admission and residence of family members can hamper integration. Delays also lead to fragmentation, with families putting more effort into the reunification process than into their contributions to the host society. Moreover, focusing the family reunification debate on the perspective of economic impact and shifting immigration policy towards preferences for skilled labour migration increases the duration of family separation, and thus increases the number of people affected by migration. Children ultimately suffer, since they are denied the presence of one parent and the chance to live in a stable, inclusive environment.²⁰

The impact of family migration on children and the elderly remaining at home

Migration can bring positive benefits not only to migrants themselves, but also to their family members who remain behind in countries of origin. Their living conditions improve and many gain better access to services, including better goods, good quality education and improved health care. That notwithstanding, separation of family members often determines significant socio-economic outcomes that affect individuals and the family unit overall.

The reality of contemporary migration is such that those who stay behind are often negatively impacted by the absence of the member(s) of the family who have migrated. Parent-child relationships are particularly affected.

Migrant workers are often forced to leave their children behind owing either to restrictive policies regarding accompanying dependents in the country of destination, or because their job makes it impossible for them to take their children with them²¹. This situation forces parents to leave their children in the care of members of their extended family or other members of their home communities. While limited research has been done on the health and social effects of migration on families left behind, the separation of children from their parents has been found to have profoundly negative emotional effects, generating significant behavioural change, and feelings of loss, sadness, abandonment, anger and rejection. Case studies in countries with high rates of female migration confirm that children staying behind often feel abandoned by their mothers and tend to lose respect for and trust in their parents²². Moreover, migration of mothers contributes to a decline in children's

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, Directive 2009/50/EC. The so-called Blue Card Directive stipulates the conditions of entry and residence of non-EU/EFTA nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment, including family reunification rights.

²⁰ Fernando Borraz, Susan Pozo and Máximo Rossi (2008) *And What About the Family Back Home? International Migration and Happiness*

²¹ IOM World Migration Report 2008, Chapter 6, Family Migration.

²² Maria G. Hernandez (2013), *Migrating alone or rejoining the family? Implications of migration strategies and family separations for Latino adolescents*, Research in Human Development.

school attendance, an increase in early marriage of adolescent girls, as well as heightened risk of drug abuse and other negative social behaviors²³. Fathers remaining at home with their children cannot easily fulfil the traditional role that mothers assume, and often have difficulty coping with the multitude of tasks they face, and the ensuing loneliness and stress they feel. A study conducted in Moldova shows that national support for children affected by migration is often limited to school activities, while other institutions tend not to be concerned with the situation of children left behind by migrant parents.²⁴

The migration of family members can also have a significant effect on the elderly. Despite calls²⁵ for greater attention to be paid to the situation of the elderly left behind, little is known of the specific impacts of migration on this group. Studies show that remittances sent by adult children can benefit elderly parents left behind by increasing the prospects of improving their living standards. The prolonged absence of their children, however, may have a severe psychological outcome.²⁶ Grandparents are very often the sole caretakers of their grandchildren and their other family members who remain at home. They are therefore often burdened by increased responsibilities and risk serious health problems. For many of these elderly people, the social costs of the migration of their children and/or children's spouses seem to outweigh the benefits both for them and for the grandchildren left in their care. Such situations highlight the acute need for support programmes in communities of origin to help those who are left behind to cope with the migration of their family members. Case studies have shown that the presence of support systems for families staying behind can help them to remain resilient and positive; similarly, migrants maintaining constant communication with their children and parents by telephone, Skype or Internet can contribute significantly to the well-being of those family members left behind and of the family as a whole.

Evidence of the disruptive impact of migration on families shows how important it is to analyse the non-economic social impacts of migration. The significant psychological and emotional effects of family migration should not be overlooked in migration research. Raising community awareness and supporting adult family members to take on and assume domestic tasks such as care for children and the elderly can contribute positively to the well-being of families and communities. Finally, given the developmental implications of migration on the migrants themselves and on their families, a better assessment should be made of the needs and responsibilities of all members involved in the family migration chain to ensure that these are met both in the country of origin and in the country of destination. Migrants should be able to enjoy decent working and living conditions and personal development, as well as sustainable development for their families and communities.

The role of young people in family migration

Recent statistics show that youth account for 12 per cent of all international migrants, with one in every eight migrants being a young migrant²⁷. This figure refers to migrants aged between 15 and 24 years old, in line with the United Nations definition of youth²⁸. This paper, however, does not limit its scope solely to this category but strives to look at a larger group of young people beyond 18 years of age, reflecting various socio-economic and demographic circumstances.^{29,30} Although mobility of young

²³ UNICEF 2006, Study report- The situation of children left behind by migrating parents

²⁴ *Idem*.

²⁵ 30th session of the Commission on Population and Development in New York in 1997.

²⁶ *Impact of children's migration on health and health care-seeking behavior of elderly left behind*, Ramesh Adhikari, Aree Jampaklay and Aphichat Chamrathirong, 2011.

²⁷ Estimates by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013

²⁸ United Nations (1981), Report of the Advisory Committee for the International Youth Year, A/36/215, Annex, United Nations, New York.

²⁹ Discussions on youth in this paper refer to young people over the age of 18 years old, who are thus not covered by the scope of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child « every human being below the age of 18 years »

³⁰ Several working definitions of youth and young people exist in practice: UN Secretariat/ILO/UNESCO: Youth is defined as persons aged 15–24; UN Habitat: Youth - aged 15–32; UNICEF/WHO/UNFPA: Adolescent - 10–19,

people has been at the top of many international agendas in recent years, many aspects of their migration experience are still not included in policy debates. Migration represents an important step towards achieving a sustainable life for youth and their families, providing young people with opportunities for human and economic development. Through migration, young people have the opportunity to become powerful agents for change and development by bridging developmental gaps and complementing ageing societies in countries of origin and destination alike. That notwithstanding, evidence of the multiple roles youth can play in the migration cycle is limited, which can obstruct the full realization of their potential. Youth have three main roles in family migration: migrating alone to escape poverty, support their families, escape conflict or climate hazards, or for improved study opportunities; migrating to reunite with their families abroad; and staying behind in their countries of origin to look after their families in the absence of their parents or siblings. While these perspectives on youth migration are not exhaustive they reflect the complex and varied nature of the issue. In all the three of these situations young people can benefit from migration as much as they can be negatively affected by it. Better living standards and development opportunities provided as a result of the financial contribution made by their parents abroad are often outweighed by the difficult conditions young people face when staying at home in the absence of parents, such as the excessive burden of supporting their family, lack of schooling, unemployment and risk of abuse and psychosocial problems. Similarly, youth migrating alone or accompanying their parents may face restrictive policies in the country of destination, as well as discrimination, marginalization and unemployment. These are but a few of the migration challenges facing young people. Unemployment remains a key driver for youth migration and a critical challenge: in 2013, of the 228 million young people affected by poverty, 75 million were registered as unemployed³¹. This situation only serves to expose youth to highly vulnerable situations.

Young people constitute a growing and highly educated share of the international population. Their potential to improve and contribute to the development of their communities of origin and destination cannot be underestimated. In the absence of a sustainable response to challenges related to their migration experience, their skills can be wasted. Furthermore, the protection needs and vulnerabilities of youth are not dissimilar to those of children, although young people over the age of 18 years do not come within the scope of international treaties and are consequently exposed to a number of human rights violations. Young migrants in irregular situations, who lack accurate information about their intended destination and face difficult socio-economic situations in their country of destination or origin, remain exposed and vulnerable to many potentially abusive situations. Legislation and policies addressing protection, support, and awareness of youth impacted by migration and their rights can benefit their wellbeing thereby further enabling them to take ownership of their contribution to development³².

Conclusions

In the context of migration, family has long been approached purely from an economic perspective. Given its policy implications, however, the dynamics of family migration have such an impact on the members of the family that greater consideration should be given to the position of family migration in the policy debate. The potential for families to contribute to development is often reduced as a result of challenging migration experiences. Greater attention to coherent policy is necessary to better assess the potential of the family unit in international migration discourse, as well as the protection challenges resulting from this trend and its potential impact on individual family members and society overall. Although current policy discussions increasingly focus on the impact of migration on child rights and family, there continues to be a dearth of information about children, elderly people who

Young People - 10–24, Youth - 15–24; UNICEF: Child - up to the age of 18; African Youth Charter: Youth - 15–35. The variety of definitions responds to different circumstances and needs relating to young people and youth in a given situation.

³¹ ILO 2013, Employment trends for youth- A generation at risk.

³² The World Youth Report, UN DESA, 2013

migrate or stay behind, and the resulting changes in family structures and relations due to the absence of one or more parents and other family members. Scarce data on this aspect accounts in part for the lack of policies developed to address challenges related to the migration of families, either in countries of origin or in countries of destination³³. Research and policy therefore need to take better account of the specific vulnerabilities of each context and situation of family migration. Policymakers in countries of origin and destination face the difficult task of identifying mechanisms and appropriate policies to promote economic development through migrants' contributions, while ensuring adequate protection for the well-being of migrants and members of their families.

Selected further reading

- IDM 2014: First intersessional workshop "South-South Migration: Partnering Strategically for Development" (24-25 March 2014)
- IOM 2014 International Migration Journal, Vol. 52, No.3
- IOM and Eurasyllum 2014 Migration Policy Practice, Vol. 3, No. 6
- GMG 2014 Report "Migration and Youth: Challenges and Opportunities"
- IOM 2013 Children on the Move
- IOM 2013 World Migration "Report Migrant Well-being and development"
- UN DESA 2013 World Youth Report
- ACP Observatory 2012 "Transnational families and the social and gender impact of mobility in ACP countries"
- IOM 2011 Unaccompanied Children on the Move
- IOM 2010 World Migration Report "The Future of Migration: Building Capacities for Change"
- GFMD 2010 "Partnerships for Migration and Human Development; Shared Prosperity, Shared Responsibility"
- GFMD 2010 Civil Society Days Background papers
- IOM 2008 World Migration Report "Managing Labour Mobility in the Evolving Global Economy"

Please visit the workshop webpage: <http://www.iom.int/cms/idmmigrationandfamilies>

³³ See UNICEF 2009.