



My Opinion Matters: A Study on the Impact of Paternal and Maternal Migration on the Lives of Adolescents and their Families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

This study was made possible through the collaboration of the National Institute for Children and the Family (INFA), the Ministry for Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES), the Defense for Children International (DNI) and UNICEF Ecuador. It addresses migration as a family experience, emphasizing its influence on the lives of adolescents whose parents have left the country. The complete report (available in Spanish) is based on data collected by a national survey in which approximately 923 adolescent children of emigrants, between the ages 12 to 17 years, participated.

The study focused on the basic features of the parental migratory process through the observations and experiences of the adolescents left behind; the adolescents' participation in the migration project; and their suggestions for addressing the problems posed by migration. The following are some of the questions this research aims to answer based on the perceptions and views of the adolescents themselves:

- When parents migrate, where do they go?
- What is the nature of the relationship between parent and adolescent?
- What aspects of their lives have changed as a result of their parents' migration?
- How do they feel about their parents' absence?
- How do they feel about their current situation?
- What expectations do they have for their lives in face of migration?

Collecting the data, based on the perception adolescents have regarding the impact of migration on their lives, allows

us to complement other domestic studies on national and international migration. In addition, it is not possible to address the effects and dimensions of the impact of this process on group(s) that have not had the opportunity to express themselves and to present their attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of migration and its effect on them. The objective of this study is not only to make visible the opinions of adolescents on migration, but to contribute to the design of public policies that guarantee the full protection of adolescents "left behind."

BACKGROUND

Migration in Ecuador

Migration in Ecuador over the past 60 years has been a very complex process that involves economic, social, cultural, and psychological variables. According to Acosta et al, there have been two stages of migration: (1) before 1998, with the United States being the primary destination; and (2) after 1998, which marked the beginning of a wave of migration to Europe, mainly to Spain and Italy. It is important to note that the role of the family, in the migration process, has been different during each stage. In particular, the second wave of migration has developed "into a family survival strategy" (Acosta et al, 2006).

The Emergence of Transnational Families

Transnational families owe their existence to the rise of communication and transportation technologies, economic transformations, and cultural features in their countries of origin. A transnational family is defined as a family that lives some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create a sense of collective welfare and

unity even across national borders. However, the transnational family does not always function properly and may have difficulties fulfilling its roles (e.g. raising children). This might pose the threat of increased likelihood for family value crisis, such as the increase of drug addiction among children or the appearance of youth gangs (Acosta et al).

Human Rights of Migrants and their Families

The analysis of migration, as a family strategy, brings awareness to the analysis of the phenomenon in relation to the general theme of human rights; especially the rights of girls and adolescents. From this perspective, the formation of transnational families is an example of the limitations or lack of interest within states to comply with the provisions of Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which pertain to the right of family reunification and the obligation of the state to take measures against the illegal trafficking and unlawful detention of children abroad, either by a parent or by a third party. Similar limitations or disinterest are evident in regards to Article 22 of the CRC, concerning refugee children and adolescents, and the requirements of various other national and international mechanisms for the protection of migrants and their families.

The Impacts of Migration on the Family

According to the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion, migration affects 284,027 children and adolescents in the country. Migration has a variety of impacts, the majority of which are negative, such as: 1) emotional impacts, 2) social stigma, 3) self-control and maturity, 3) accountability and maternal and/or paternal roles forcefully and prematurely, 4) incidence in construction of identities and life projects, and 5) greater vulnerability, abuse and violence (Camacho y Hernández, 2008). These impacts of migration are expressions of family crisis (both social and personal) and of the reorganization of the different domains of life experience. This includes not only the reorganization of the lives of those directly affected by migration, but also of those who are left behind. Finally, there is also a change in perceptions and relationships that members of the community hold towards relatives of migrants.

KEY FINDINGS

The impact of migration on adolescents left behind is evident in many areas: their participation in the event, their acceptance (approval or disapproval), the period of absence, the destination, the situation they perceive in the country of destination, the roles assumed by the mother or father who remain, care by extended family and their relationships with the children, the receipt of remittances and their management, communication methods and the use of technology, the quality of exchanges mediated by these technologies in parent-child relationships, the reduction of everyday conflicts, changes in lifestyles and the use of leisure time, the material conditions of life, the family economy, and how they view themselves and their families.

Acceptance of Their Parents' Decision to Migrate

The decision to migrate is made by the adults in the family, in most cases without consulting the children. It is almost always recognized, but not always accepted, as the means by which parents can improve the family's economic situation. Data collected by adolescents suggests that, when adolescents have visited their parents abroad, their acceptance of the decision to migrate has been less difficult. It was evident that acceptance rates decrease when girls had mothers who migrate and when boys had fathers who migrated. Thus, this confirms the need to have a mother or father figure present as a mechanism for recognition and personal development.

Perceptions of Their Parents' Situation Abroad and the Central Role of the Mother

Most boys and girls (two thirds of respondents) perceived the situation of their parents once they have settled abroad as positive. The remainder of adolescents considered their parents' situation fair or poor. In these cases, there are psychological patterns of insecurity and vulnerability among boys that affect their performance in everyday life. Almost all adolescents who participated in the study agree that the mother is the essence of family cohesion, even when she is outside the country. The centrality of the mother in dealing with problematic situations affecting children is far from replaced by substitute caregivers. Perceptions of the father, who usually assumes the responsibility for caring for the family in the mother's absence, are different. In this case, care is usually delegated to other members of the nuclear family (daughters and older children) or extended family.

Remittances

The vast majority of participants had a positive attitude towards the sending and receiving of remittances. Remittances are managed by adults and, most often, by the mother when the father has left the country. The frequency of shipments, usually monthly, allows families to manage a stable and continuous budget. Standard of living is maintained or improved when compared to the lifestyle previous to migration.

Communication with Their Parents

The frequency of communication with parents allows for the maintenance and renewal of family ties. Over half of the children, in the group that participated, have never been visited by their parents. Secondly, only a low percentage of them have had the opportunity to visit their parents in countries abroad. However, the use and spread of communication technologies in the country has helped improve relations with parents abroad and lessened the void caused by the lack of physical contact with parents. However, this by no means compensates for the physical absence of parents. For this reason, we can assume that the prolonged physical absence almost always generates the weakening of ties between parents and children.

Relationships with Their Parents

In regard to the quality of relationships with absent parents, adolescents believe that they have maintained a good relationship and that it may have even improved. The departure of parents, either one or both, may decrease the presence of certain harmful family dynamics (such as abuse). In other words, the parent-child exchange, maintained via communication technologies, is largely free of those factors in daily living that generate conflict. Furthermore, although only seen in a small percentage, it is clear that some boys may experience greater opportunities for autonomy due to parental absence, which deepens their sense of self-development.

Absence of Physical Affection Due to Their Parents' Migration (Especially Mothers)

One aspect that deserves special attention, as it is a fundamental right of children, is the absence of physical affection due to parent's migration, which has a high "no response" on the survey. One possible reason for the high rate of "no response" is the existence of painful or diffuse feelings caused by the absence of parents. Sadness is the prevalent feeling that most teens experience accompanying the departure of their parents.

Changes in Their Lifestyles and Others' Perception of Them

Adolescents use their leisure time differently than they did when their parents resided in the country. Parents' absence has increased the membership of adolescents in organized groups following their parents' departure. For example, girls belong to sports groups to a greater extent than boys. Regardless of their own school performance, most boys feel good about the schools they attend, which are the same as those they attended when their parents were in the country. Additionally, those in contact with these adolescents have positive perceptions of these lifestyle changes. However, the general perception remains (though in some cases it has improved) that the departure of parents has a deteriorating effect on the lives of adolescents, despite the fact that, in contrast, most of their lives have improved (economically) or remained the same.

Perceptions of Their Current Life As A Result of Migration

Almost half of the boys surveyed consider migration as a temporary option for their families. They have high expectations of family reunification when their parents return. However, there is a significant amount of respondents, especially within the group whose mothers have migrated, which see migration as a final option. The vast majority believe that their current situation will improve. This hope of improvement is based on the children's interest in obtaining a university degree and the confidence that the family will be reunified.

Their Ideas for Addressing the Impacts of Migration

Boys see the emigration of their parents as a means aimed at improving their parent's economic condition. This, perhaps, is because the adolescents focus their attention more on the causes of the problem, which impact their personal lives. For them, migration occurs substantially for economic reasons.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

While there are differences in the behaviour of the variables of the study in relation to the type of emigrant parent (i.e. father, mother, both) or the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (gender, age, ethnicity, region), in most cases these differences are not significant. Moreover, it is difficult to establish the sense in which these conditions influence the behaviour of these variables.

Perhaps the most significant differences centre on the persons who migrate. In this case, the differences reflect the type of communication and the roles assumed by each parent when the other one leaves. Undoubtedly, the levels of communication between mothers and children are more frequent. Furthermore mothers are considered to be stronger figures when it comes to resolving the problems that children face. Lastly, women, in comparison to men, take on the management of their families in the face of the emigration of parent(s).

The region of origin seems to affect certain features of the migration phenomenon, including the length of stay abroad. In this case, the Amazon has different characteristics to those of other regions. Moreover, there are marked differences in the behaviour of different variables in relation to gender and age, although there were some striking changes depending on who migrates. Finally, the need to affirm gender identity also exerts an important role in this study.

