

# Transnational families: Cross-country comparative perspectives

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# Transnational families: Cross-country comparative perspectives

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## Abstract

This special issue aims to address the gap in transnational families studies by identifying if there are common patterns and effects of transnational family life across countries and regions, using cross-country comparative analyses. In this editorial introduction, we highlight the overarching themes emerging from seven papers, which employ new large-scale surveys specifically designed to collect information about transnational family life across different Latin American, African, and Southeast Asian countries and China. We discuss how these comparative studies offer new ways of understanding transnational families by focusing on their prevalence, composition, the experiences of their members, and how these change over time. We also highlight how differing and changing notions of care over space and a person's lifetime influence how transnational families are created, reproduced, maintained, and experienced. In general, the issue as a whole emphasises the need to take structural factors in both sending and receiving contexts into account when studying the form that transnational families take, how this changes over time, and the general and specific gendered effects they have on different members.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With growing numbers of people migrating the world over, coupled with increasingly stringent migration policies, especially in the Global North, that make family migration a difficult undertaking, the number of transnational families in which family members live in different nations is a significant phenomenon. Accurate knowledge of the prevalence of such families does not exist, aside from approximate reports that indicate that in countries such as Mexico, Sri Lanka, Ghana, and Moldova, as many as one quarter of children under 18 years of age lives without at least one parent due to migration (UNICEF, 2006). Such children are often left in the care of another family member, although at times also non-kin may be involved, yet there is no knowledge about trends and numbers of who these caregivers are. Not only children and parents may be separated due to migration but also spouses and elderly parents from their adult children. The gap of knowledge on the prevalence and the form that transnational families take is due to the lack of statistical data collection on the phenomenon.

Existing national statistical agencies and large-scale population censuses have a bias for what is happening within nation-state borders and thus do not include information on family members living

abroad. Furthermore, such data are difficult to collect. In countries of origin, family members may not be aware of the exact location of their migrants abroad, or they may hesitate to divulge such information in case migrants have not yet legalised their stays abroad. Likewise, in destination countries, migrant populations are often difficult to reach, lacking baseline surveys that indicate how many there are and where, and may be distrustful of surveys asking information about their families in origin countries (see Beauchemin & Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2011, for a discussion on the difficulties of collecting large-scale matched sample data).

Smaller scale in-depth studies that emerged in the 2000s served to draw attention to the phenomenon of transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). These studies followed the broader shift in the late 20th century in migration studies that adopted a transnational perspective. Such a perspective understands migrant realities to be composed of multi-stranded relationships, spanning social, cultural, economic, and political domains that link migrants with their home societies (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1992; Levitt, 2001; Mazzucato, Dijk, Horst, & Vries, 2004). Transnational family studies focused on how migrant parents experience and organise their transnational family lives. These studies have emphasised the emotional difficulties that parents, and especially mothers, experience

due to prolonged absences from their children (Dreby, 2007; Parreñas, 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2008); the way children suffer from parental absence (Parreñas, 2005) but also shape their parents' migration trajectories (Dreby, 2010); and, more recently, how migrant fathers too experience difficulties due to separation (Kilkey, Plomien, & Perrons, 2014; Pribilsky, 2012). Furthermore, a focus on the role of information and communication technologies showed that it was possible for parents to fulfil their caring responsibilities and emotional needs from afar (Madianou & Miller, 2011) and could help shape young migrants' identities when facing a hostile host environment, by linking them to multiple audiences, also in their home country (Gifford & Wilding, 2013). However, because of the small-scale nature of such studies and their lack of a non-transnational comparison group, it was unclear the extent to which these experiences could be generalised across different contexts and whether the detected phenomena were particular to transnational parenting or might also be experienced by a wider population.

Recently, studies have emerged employing new large-scale surveys specifically designed to collect information about transnational family life, focusing on parents who migrate and children who remain at origin, usually in the care of another extended or nuclear family member. Studies have analysed the effects of migration on different family members: those who migrate and those who stay at origin. Results have been varied and at times provide more nuance to the smaller scale studies, indicating that it is not transnational family life *per se* that leads to lower emotional well-being, but also the characteristics of migrant parents, such as their income or legal status abroad (Dito, Mazzucato, & Schans, 2016), the availability of family networks (Donato & Duncan, 2011), the transnational family form (Mazzucato et al., 2015), the type of parental absence (Nobles, 2011), and the school and family environments of the children who stay behind (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010; Wen & Lin, 2012). There are notable differences in findings between the large-scale analyses. For example, Chinese studies of internal migration and studies of international migration from individual Latin American countries tend to show negative outcomes for parents and children (Heymann et al., 2009; Liu & Ge, 2009), while Southeast Asian and African studies find that there are conditions under which transnational family life does not translate into negative outcomes for the people involved (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Mazzucato et al., 2015; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016).

Some of the differences in findings between studies may have to do with the specificities of the contexts of study; for example, how care and kinship are practiced may differ according to different normative contexts (Mazzucato, 2011). Where extended and flexible family arrangements are the norm irrespective of migration, such as in the West African context, less stigma may be associated with parent-child separations due to migration (Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014) than has been detected in countries such as in Sri Lanka (Jayasundere, Abeyasekera, & Idamegama, 2015) and the Philippines (Parreñas, 2005). Yet differences in indicators used and the variety of estimation methods employed may also be at the source of some of the differences detected between findings of studies. This limits the comparability of findings.

Finally, very few cross-country comparative analyses exist and none across world regions. The recent studies mentioned above

mainly focus on one "migration flow," for example, from Mexico to the US (Donato & Duncan, 2011; Nobles, 2011) or between an African and a European country (Beauchemin et al., 2014; Dito et al., 2016). Very few cross-country comparative analyses of transnational families have been conducted, and the few that exist compare flows within Southeast Asia and between Africa and Europe, with the exception of three projects (CHAMPSEA & MAFE, TCRA/TCRAF-Eu<sup>1</sup>).

This special issue aims to address these gaps by identifying if there are common patterns across countries and regions, what aspects of transnational family life are commonly found and which, instead, may be particular to specific regions of the world. The special issue consists of seven papers comparing trends and effects of transnational family life across different Latin American, African, and Southeast Asian countries and China. The papers are interdisciplinary, combining geographical, sociological, and demographic perspectives, with special attention to issues of gender and the effects migration has on families.

The articles in this special issue are the result of two workshops organised in 2015 and 2016 at Maastricht and St Andrews Universities, respectively, which brought together researchers who have been involved in the collection and analysis of 10 recent large-scale data sets specifically on transnational families, capturing most, if not all of such data sets worldwide. The workshops were organised in such a way as to engage researchers in joint, cross-country, and comparative analyses. While most special issues are about creating links across papers, which we also do, this special issue has the particular characteristic of harmonisation done within each paper in order to be able to conduct a joint analysis of different data sets. These analyses have been made possible through a first intensive workshop in which we brainstormed on how best to combine and compare indicators and harmonise definitions (workshop I) and identifying paper ideas, followed by a period of cross-team collaborations in analysing and writing of papers. In a final workshop, all teams presented the preliminary analyses and received feedback from the other teams of authors as well as additional international experts invited to the second workshop.

The special issue brings together 18 authors of which four geographers, five demographers, seven sociologists, one economist, and one political scientist (although many of these authors would see themselves as a mixture between at least two of these disciplines), and all of whom have expertise on migration. Each paper is co-authored by people from different disciplines, a mix of senior and early career scholars, and experts of different world regions. All papers focus on transnational families that are composed of one or both parents who have migrated and left one or more children at origin. They focus on international migration except for the Chinese case, in which internal migration is considered to have commonalities with international migration given the great geographical distances and administrative hurdles entailed in migration within China.

We summarise briefly the different papers as to how they appear in this special issue. The special issue opens with papers that aim at

<sup>1</sup>Child Health and Migrant Parents in South East Asia (CHAMPSEA): <http://www.populationasia.org/CHAMPSEA.htm> Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE): [https://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/Transnational\\_Child\\_Raising\\_Arrangements\\_between\\_Africa\\_and\\_Europe\\_\(TCRA/TCRAF-Eu\)](https://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/Transnational_Child_Raising_Arrangements_between_Africa_and_Europe_(TCRA/TCRAF-Eu)): <http://www.tcra.nl>

understanding the prevalence and types of transnational family forms across different Latin American and African countries, identifying patterns of differences and similarities across countries (Caarls, Haagsman, Kraus, & Mazzucato, 2018; DeWaard, Nobles, & Donato, 2018). This is the first time that such estimates are made based on scientifically collected data. A second set of contributions focuses on particular aspects of transnational family life. Jordan, Dito, Nobles, and Graham (2018) focus on parent child interactions through engaged parenting by comparing Southeast Asian, sub-Saharan, and Latin American contexts. Eremenko and Bennett (2018) focus on the effects of child reunification in France and the United Kingdom on the well-being outcomes for children. Wu and Cebotari (2018) focus on the effects of parental migration on child well-being by comparing children with different migration experiences in China and Ghana. Liu, Riosmena, and Creighton (2018) look at how decision-making with regard to migration is affected by gendered roles within the family and network social capital of Mexican and Senegalese migrants. Eremenko and González-Ferrer (2018) investigate the decision to reunify with a child according to diverse family characteristics of migrants in France and Spain. The papers address some of the recently identified gaps in knowledge on transnational families relating to child outcomes/child experiences, transnational family forms and prevalence, gendered outcomes and how contextual factors in migrant sending and receiving areas, from social networks to migration policies, shape the effects of migration on families (Mazzucato, 2015).

We summarise below four key methodological and conceptual lessons these studies reveal.

## 2 | THE PREVALENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Most of our knowledge to date on the prevalence of transnational families comes from reports that are not based on national or large-scale data collection. Yet they do indicate that such families are more numerous than the lack of policy and academic attention until recently would lead one to believe. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated the presence of between 3 and 6 million Filipino, 1 million Indonesian, and half a million Thai children who live without at least one parent due to migration (Bryant, 2005). Thus, given the large numbers and lack of knowledge of even basic characteristics of such families, there is a need for descriptive information in this area.

DeWaard et al. (2018) estimated the prevalence of transnational families in seven Latin American countries by focusing on transnational families, which they refer to as Parental Absence via Migration, using both child and parent centric data. They put these estimates into perspective by comparing them to parental absence due to union dissolution and mortality. Based on child-centric data, their estimates show the importance of Parental Absence via Migration in Latin American family life with evidence of diverse rates of prevalence across the seven countries. They show the average prevalence rate ranging from 7.1% in Peru to approximately 16% in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico, to 21% in the Dominican Republic. In five of the seven countries studied, migration is a more

important source of parental absence than union dissolution and mortality, while these latter forms of absence have received more attention in research and policy making in this region.

Caarls et al. (2018) compare characteristics of migrant parents in transnational families to migrant parents in non-transnational families, that is, those who are living with all of their children in the country of destination. They do so by comparing data on migrants from five sub-Saharan countries (Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola) in eight European destination countries (France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, and Belgium). Their work highlights the diversity of transnational parents in their demographic, socio-economic, migration characteristics and caregiving arrangements and the intersectionality of these characteristics. Most of their data show the presence of a highly educated sub-Saharan migrant population across the different destination countries with few exceptions and does not vary with transnational or non-transnational parenting. However, they show selectivity by the number of children (more for transnational parents) and where they were born (most children of non-transnational parents were born in the destination countries), along with stability of relationships (multiple relationships evident among transnational parents). Such findings point to patterns of how a transnational family life emerges among sub-Saharan migrants in Europe. Importantly, they also find significant differences between transnational mothers and fathers, which we discuss below. Such findings help identify important avenues of further investigation, as there seem to be clear patterns that lead to particular practices and demands on transnational parenting.

## 3 | TRANSNATIONALISM AS A PROCESS

Most of the papers in this special issue look at transnationalism as a *process*. This results in conceptual and analytical innovations in order to bring dynamic processes of family formations into the analysis of transnational families. The studies use methods that capture the long-term trajectories of transnational family life and/or by using more nuanced definitions of conventional concepts such as care and the "left-behind" that have recently been the focus of transnational family literature (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

### 3.1 | Conceptualising transnational families and the "left-behind"

Four contributions in this issue (Eremenko & Bennett, 2018, Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018, Caarls et al., 2018, and Liu et al., 2018) consider transnational families as part of a shifting constellation of family forms that exist throughout the migration process. For example, a mother might migrate, then reunify with her spouse, leaving two children behind, then after a few years be reunified with one child and subsequently with the other child. This trajectory shows that a family can go from being united in one country, to being transnational and taking on various forms over time, to being reunified again. This is a conceptual shift from the more common cross-sectional studies that have been conducted to date. The findings show that taking transnational families as a process over time makes a

difference and often nuances the findings with respect to the effects that transnational families have on various outcomes. For example, Wu and Cebotari (2018) show that whether a child has prior migration experience before returning to her home region makes a difference on her psychological well-being relative to a child in the village who also has migrant parents but did not migrate herself. In the more common cross-sectional studies on transnational families, both children would have been categorised as “left-behind,” and thus such differences would have been hidden. Also Eremenko and Bennett (2018) take time into account by differentiating categories of reunified children according to the length of separation from their parents before being reunified. Thus, seriously taking the processual nature of migration into account means reconsidering categories such as “left-behind” or “reunified” children, which renders them immobile and monolithic, and using more differentiated categories that can take into account children's varied experiences of migration.

Shifting categories over time poses methodological challenges, as research to date has mainly worked with static categories of families (once a transnational family, always a transnational family). Caarls et al. (2018), Eremenko and Bennett (2018), Eremenko and González-Ferrer (2018), and Liu et al. (2018), instead, use event history or sequence analyses to capture the changing nature of family forms over time, allowing a more nuanced understanding of how transnational family life takes shape over time and how the different trajectories may affect the people involved differently. Other analyses urge us to look inside the broad category of transnational parents by, for example, focusing on the nature of their engagement in the lives of those in origin countries (Jordan et al., 2018) or the marital dynamics of these parents which yield intact or non-intact families (Eremenko and Gonzalez-Ferrer) or the dynamics of networks in these families (Liu et al., 2018). DeWaard et al. (2018) show the importance of making a distinction between transnational families and families experiencing other types of separation due to divorce or mortality.

### 3.2 | Notions of care

Notions of care are not universal. Already we have highlighted that how family members experience transnational family life is context-specific and mediated through normative contexts of family, care and child upbringing. Yet the studies in this issue show that even within such contexts, transnational family members' notions of care change over time, depending on their migration experience. Eremenko and Bennett (2018) highlight how long spells of parental migration during childhood are associated with poorer psychosocial well-being after reunification for young adults. This may relate to long spells of separation causing children to develop more attachments with their caregivers in the origin country. Children may revise their notion of parental care upon reunification and become resentful. Wu and Cebotari's (2018) study highlights that children's perception of parental care differs by experiences of migration and not necessarily only by separation.

Liu et al. (2018) show how transnational family care could entail facilitating the migration of siblings. In line with this, Eremenko and González-Ferrer's (2018) study shows how proximate caregiving

aspirations through family reunification are complicated by marital dissolution, which requires more resources to maintain the transnational family arrangement than reunification. These two studies indicate how differing and changing notions of care over space and a person's lifetime influence how transnational families are created, reproduced, maintained, and experienced in contexts like Mexico, Senegal, Spain, and France.

Jordan et al. (2018), using data from three quantitative surveys on transnational families in the Philippines, Nigeria, and Mexico, push the definition of parental care at a distance to include more than just financial remittances, a standard that has been used in previous quantitative analyses, to include broader notions of care. Using the term *engaged parenting*, referring to remitting and communicating frequently, the authors capture the extent to which frequent and proactive care at a distance influences children's daily lives by affecting children's time spent on homework, household chores, and leisure. Similarly, DeWaard et al. (2018), by distinguishing between different types of physical parental absence, highlight that Latin American migrant parents are better able to care for the living conditions in which their children are living in than parents who are absent due to divorce.

## 4 | GENDER AND TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY DYNAMICS

Gender is an important analytical lens for studying the effects and experiences of transnational family life. While most of the small-scale in-depth studies on transnational families have focused on mothers, Caarls et al. (2018) show the importance of also studying transnational fathers, as they have different characteristics from mothers. In the African cases studied, fathers are more highly educated, separated for longer periods, generally have the children's mother as a caregiver in the origin country, and form unions later in life than women. DeWaard et al. (2018) observed differences in how paternal and maternal migration shapes the living conditions of children in most of the sending countries in Latin America. In analysing the role of gender, Jordan et al. (2018) looked at how gender influences engaged parenting as well as its effects. They find that maternal migration is associated with restricted engaged parenting. Taken together, these findings start to seek possible explanations for what may be at the source of findings by small-scale in-depth studies that find that transnational family life seems to be more emotionally taxing for migrant mothers than fathers. Rather than rely on biological explanations about the special bonds between children and their mothers, these studies point to possible structural differences affecting the ability of mothers to care from afar. These warrant further investigation as they may point to more effective policy solutions than have been done in some sending countries where women's mobility has been restricted (Jayasundere et al., 2015) or demonised in public discourse (Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015).

Gender also features in the way transnational social networks function in influencing sibling migration in Senegal and Mexico. Liu et al. (2018) show the importance of sisters in facilitating the migration of male siblings from Senegal while in Mexico, sisters and

brothers influence the migration of female and male siblings, respectively.

## 5 | CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN MIGRANT SENDING AND RECEIVING COUNTRIES

As argued above, generalisable studies on transnational families are virtually non-existent. The DeWaard et al. (2018) study is one of the first to address this in a cross-country comparative manner. It indicates that while the prevalence of transnational families differs on a per country basis in Latin America, transnational families contribute to half of all parent away families in Latin American countries. Together with the Caarls et al. (2018) study, they highlight differences between father and mother away families, in terms of their compositions and, in Latin America, their asset ownership. In all African countries, men who migrate predominantly relied on the mother of their children as caregiver, yet when mothers migrate, they had other caregivers for their children, such as grandmothers or aunts. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, parent-away families mainly consisted of fathers who migrated internationally, while in Colombia, Dominican Republic, Peru, and Puerto Rico, such families mainly consisted of migrant mothers who migrated internally.

In the African cases, international migration of mothers occurs especially in the context of following a migrant husband, or, when they migrate alone, it is mainly single women. This highlights the importance of identifying which parent is away and to study both cases of father and mother away families, as the effects may be quite different.

Caarls et al. (2018) show stark differences in compositions of transnational families in Congo and Angola and in Senegal compared with the other African countries. Here, the authors suggest that the conflict and post-conflict settings of Congo and Angola and the significantly different normative organisation of family life in Senegal can help explain these differences and are worthy of further investigation. Congo and Angola are both countries that have recently and are still experiencing areas of civil conflict. This leads to splintered families due to war, which then continues to reverberate in the forms these families take when members migrate internationally. In Senegal, a country where family norms keep women strongly under the supervision of their husbands or husbands' families and where polygamy is the most prevalent of all African cases, transnational families tend to be father-away families, while in the other countries, this was more equally distributed between women and men.

Other important contextual factors relate to policies in destination countries. Eremenko and Bennett (2018) show that the effect of separation from parents on similar populations of youth from different sub-Saharan Africa has distinct effects in the United Kingdom and France. While the reasons for this are beyond the scope of the study, this suggests a need to study similar origin country groups in different destination countries in order to better understand the effects of destination country contexts on the effects of transnational family life (Mazzucato, Dito, Grassi, & Vivet, 2016). Eremenko and González-Ferrer (2018) show that child reunification patterns in France and

Spain are slower for non-intact families and especially problematic for single mothers in Spain. This again implies that policy contexts may be affecting certain types of transnational families more than others. Future studies need to pay particular attention to the gender dimensions of policy effects.

There are differences found in the influence of education status of migrant parents and caregivers on engaged parenting indicated by Jordan et al. (2018) in the Philippines, Nigeria, and Mexico. While education status is not associated with engaged parenting for the Philippines and Nigerian cases, the education of the migrant father and non-migrant mother increases engaged parenting of the migrant father from Mexico. The authors raise the question of whether the difference between the recognition of educational qualifications between men and women in the destination country may explain such findings, influencing their earning potential that facilitates communication and remitting.

The forms that families take are also affected by policies in the destination country. Eremenko and González-Ferrer (2018) indicate that the higher propensity of reunification in a more restrictive but more predictable and well-established reunification context like France facilitates the reunification of families rather than the uncertain family reunification procedures in Spain.

In general, the cross-country comparative analyses of the studies in this special issue emphasise the need to take structural factors into account when studying the form that transnational families take, how this changes over time and the effects they have on the different members. This is in addition to the literature on transnational families that has to date focused on small-scale in-depth studies that have emphasised the personal and micro-level contexts of transnational family life.

In this sense, this issue heeds to the call by Glick Schiller (2015) to embed the analysis of transnational migration phenomena, in a multi-scalar analysis in which families are situated in local, national, and international levels that shape the need to migrate, the way migrants are received in destination countries, and the political, economic, and cultural contexts in the origin countries which, in turn, shape the way transnational family life takes place. The contributions to this special issue have highlighted the structurally different forms families take in different countries and between men and women (Caarls et al., 2018; DeWaard et al., 2018) pointing to the need to better understand what underlies these differences.

The studies in this issue indicate the importance of family dynamics in shaping the speed of reunification (Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018); the lower propensity of engaged parenting among migrant women (Jordan et al., 2018) hinting at the limited integration of migrant mothers in destination country labour markets; the origin country specific effects related to conflict and gender and marital norms (Caarls et al., 2018); the strong gendered expectations and norms in sibling obligations (Liu et al., 2018), children's use of time (Jordan et al., 2018), their well-being (Wu & Cebotari, 2018); and in parent-child conflictual relationships (Eremenko & Bennett, 2018) and slower reunification for lone mothers (Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018). All these underscore the need to understand context-driven processes and effects at both origin and destination as the next step to further our knowledge on transnational families.

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