

Family-member migration and the psychosocial health outcomes of children in Moldova and Georgia

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The topic of this dissertation—the relationship between the migration of kin and the psychosocial health of the children who remain in the origin country—has generated intense societal interest in both Moldova and Georgia over the past decade. In both of these countries, migration has become a social and economic dilemma, both for the general population and for the state. Remittances, as one of the most visible “outputs” of migration, represent sizeable financial flows into both countries, accounting for 24.9% of GDP in Moldova and 12.1% of GDP in Georgia in 2013 (World Bank, 2015). In Moldova, most of the economic growth that occurred between 2000 and 2010 was “jobless”, fuelled by remittances; in 2010 around 40 percent of the Moldovan workforce was estimated to work abroad (World Bank, 2011). Despite such potential economic advantages of migration, however, there has been a social backlash against migration in both countries, largely in response to the migration of women. As more women have entered international migration, contributing to changing roles and relationships within families, migration has increasingly been associated with the breakdown of family relationships, growing child delinquency, and deteriorating child mental health (Prohntchi, 2005; Salah, 2008; Cheianu-Andrei et al., 2011). In both policy and public discourses, children ‘left behind’ by migrant kin, chiefly parents, are assumed to suffer from that absence, yet little research has explored the phenomenon of children in transnational families systematically. This dissertation is relevant exactly because it addresses the question of whether the migration of a parent or other close kin is actually a source of vulnerability that undermines child well-being.

Given the strong focus in discourse on the deleterious effects of migration for child emotional health, as well as the close ties between psychosocial health and other aspects of well-being such as physical health or educational performance, this dissertation specifically explored if children with migrant family members had different psychosocial health outcomes than children who had not experienced the migration of kin. The findings suggest that migration may be only marginally associated with the psychosocial health of children ‘left behind’, as the migration of kin was not found to strongly predict psychosocial dysfunction of children in either country. No form of family-member migration (that of a mother, father, grandparent, or other family member such as a sibling) was significantly associated with worse child psychosocial outcomes in Georgia. In Moldova, no

form of parental migration corresponded to worse psychosocial outcomes among girls. Among boys, however, a father's migration was associated with worse conduct problems scores, and the migration of both parents was associated with marginally worse emotional symptoms outcomes. These results undermine the assertion made in discourse that migration has consistently negative consequences for the children who experience it, as important differences existed between children in the two study countries, between boys and girls, and between children who had experienced different forms of family-member migration.

This research has clear social relevance because it highlights the gap between discourse and the lived experiences of the children and families such discourse encompasses. The framing of children in transnational families as "left behind" can (inadvertently) stigmatise migrants and their families. This is especially evident in Moldova, where children with migrant parents are regularly discussed as victims of migration by the media, international and non-governmental organisations, and policies at both national and local level. The emphasis on the suffering of children following migration—or, conversely, on the economic benefits children with migrant parents enjoy through the receipt of remittances—can make children feel ashamed of their parents' choices and can lead to unequal treatment in society (Salah, 2008; HAI/UNICEF, 2008). Salah (2008), for instance, noted that children with migrant parents may not be informed about social assistance programmes or may be denied access to them because they are assumed to benefit from remittances and therefore to belong to richer households (Salah, 2008). Other studies (e.g., UNICEF/CRIC, 2008) found that some teachers may favour the children of migrants or punish them unduly on the basis of the children's perceived financial status. Such attitudes or experiences may not be prevalent, but they do highlight how generalisations of an internally-diverse population (such as children with migrant kin) can impair the functioning of public services or policies.

The results of this dissertation therefore also have relevance for policy, primarily by highlighting that policies that address complex issues such as migration and its potential consequences for children need to be appropriately tailored to the populations they intend to address. The evidence does not suggest that family-member migration is universally bad for child well-being, but it does suggest important inequalities in experiences among different groups of children. Child psychosocial health outcomes differed markedly not only by child sex but also by who specifically had migrated, suggesting that there are distinctly gendered ways in which children negotiate the changes brought about by

migration. This research emphasises that not all forms of family-member migration carry the same opportunities and risks for the children who experience them. This is an important finding for policy or programme interventions, the effectiveness of which could be enhanced by designs that more conscientiously engage the needs of specific sub-population groups (e.g., boys with fathers abroad).

In investigating the relationship between family-member migration and child psychosocial health, this research also uncovered characteristics beyond migration that appeared to undermine child psychosocial health. Being called names such as lazy or stupid by a caregiver, or living in a region that had experienced political turmoil were consistently associated with worse psychosocial health outcomes. These characteristics were much stronger in predicting psychosocial dysfunction than family-member migration status, for children of both genders. Policy makers or programme planners who design interventions for organisations such as UNICEF could use such results to design better-targeted social services for at-risk children. Such social services could include classes on proactive child-raising that emphasise how to positively elicit behaviour change from children (without resorting to verbal abuse) or the provision of counselling services to children in the regions that have experienced particularly intense political instability. The findings that not all children were equally exposed to characteristics or factors that could act as potential psychosocial stressors suggests that any policy targeted at the child population should consider *which* children are at most risk and under *what* conditions those risks appear. To better target the vulnerable child population, however, additional data on child well-being and sources of inequality in well-being would likely need to be collected.

As this dissertation has addressed a topic that is relevant both to academia and to policy, parts of it have been strategically disseminated to different audiences. Several academic publications have resulted from this work; two articles have been accepted in international peer-reviewed journals, and another two articles are under review as of this writing. Results have also been disseminated to policy makers and child protection practitioners in Moldova and Georgia as part of the larger project to which this dissertation belongs. The work for this dissertation was completed within a European Commission-funded project called “The Effects of Migration on Children and the Elderly Left Behind in Moldova and Georgia”, which explored the potential consequences of migration for different dimensions of well-being among children and elderly individuals who experienced the migration of family members. Throughout this project, stakeholders from government and non-government agencies were asked for their

input through bilateral meetings, periodic technical working groups (TWGs), workshops, and conferences in both Moldova and Georgia. These events engaged government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations (IOs) in the research and output dissemination process, which helped ensure that many of the project outputs—such as policy briefs and multidimensional well-being indices—would be useful to policy makers and practitioners working in the field. In Moldova, the TWGs and conferences included representatives from international organisations like HelpAge International, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and UNICEF as well as representatives from the Ministry of Labour, Social Protection, and Family, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education. In Georgia, local NGOs involved in child and elderly protection services attended project workshops and conferences, as did representatives from IOs such as UNDP, IOM, and UNICEF and from government agencies such as the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and the State Commission on Migration Issues. The conferences and consultative meetings provided a useful platform for the dissemination of research results, including some of the results of this dissertation. The project officially ended in June 2013, but one of the project's legacies has been continued dialogue with the government of Georgia. Upon the request of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, the research team at the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance will be developing policy briefs describing the health and education outcomes of children in migrant households in Georgia.

The dissemination of results of this research will also continue in other, less direct forms. Over the course of my PhD, I have also become a teacher in the Migration Management Diploma Programme, a three-month course for migration management practitioners from mostly developing countries that is offered at Maastricht University, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance/UNU-MERIT. Within this programme, participants are encouraged to consider how prior research can contribute to evidence-based policy relating to migration and its potential developmental impacts. As a teacher in the course on mainstreaming migration into development policy planning, I am able to use the knowledge I have gained on the potential micro-level impacts of migration for the families and communities that remain in the origin country to better instruct students on potential policy mechanisms that can address these populations.