From Left Behind to Staying Back: Changing How We Think About Children in Migrant Households

Discussion Paper, July 2023

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MIDEQ
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1. Introduction

Migration profoundly affects the lives of children, both those who move and those who do not. The phrase "left behind children" is often used to refer to those children who remain in their home country when their parents[1] migrate to another country. It can also be applied to children whose parents have migrated internally, for example between rural and urban areas.

Based on research and analysis undertaken as part of the Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub,[2] this discussion paper challenges the dominant policy and practice narratives in relation to children whose parents have migrated without them, and specifically, the framing of these children as "left behind." Our concern with the use of this term is that it implies that children are abandoned, especially in the context of mothers migrating, and that they are passively living with the migration process and its consequences. We argue instead that migration in the

Global South is part of a household livelihood strategy which children can participate in and understand – and from which they often benefit.

Drawing on case studies highlighting the varied experiences of children whose parents have migrated without them from four very different migration contexts in the Global South – Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nepal – this paper argues for, and uses, the term "stay back" to describe children in migration households who do not move with their parents or primary, traditional, or customary carers.[3] This term better encapsulates these children's realities.

The paper concludes with reflections on what this rethinking of the concept of left behind children might mean for policy interventions intended to reduce childhood-related inequalities in contexts of migration.

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1   We use the term 'parent(s)' throughout this discussion paper to include primary, traditional, or customary caregivers.
2   Funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) (Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1), the MIDEQ Hub unpacks the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the context of the Global South by decentering the production of knowledge about migration and its consequences away from the Global North towards those countries where most migration takes place. For more information visit www.mideq.org.
3   The term "stay behind" is also used in some recent research. See, for example, Rachel Marcus, Carmen León-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho, and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, *Children Who Stay Behind in Latin America and the Caribbean While Parents Migrate* (Panama City: UNICEF LACRO, 2023).

2. Children in Migrant Households

South-South migration – that is to say, migration between the countries of the Global South – constitutes more than a third of all international migration and is increasing in many contexts.[4] As the scale of South-South migration increases, so too does the number of children who remain in countries of origin when their parents migrate.[5] Much of the literature has focused on children who stay back in the context of parental labour migration, a common phenomenon within the Global South. In many of these contexts, only one of the parents migrates but at times both parents do. Children stay back in countries of origin for a variety of reasons. For example, parents may choose not to take their children when they migrate because of the costs and challenges associated with migrating and working with children. Many migrants work very long hours with no extended family networks to support childcare responsibilities, making migrating without children a better option for some. Parents may also migrate irregularly and thus choose not to expose their children to the risks of irregular migration. Moreover, bilateral labour arrangements or visa requirements often make it challenging, or do not allow for, family members to accompany them.[6] Finally, children can also choose to not migrate with a parent, instead opting to stay back.

Although it is difficult to calculate the number of children who stay back when one or more parents migrate, estimates indicate that the figure is in the tens of millions.[7] For instance, 27 per cent of all children in the Philippines are estimated to stay back when one or more parents migrates, 37 per cent in Ghana, 36 per cent in Moldova, and 39 per cent in Georgia.[8] A significant portion of the existing literature focuses on rural to urban migration in China, where there are an estimated 61 million stay back children, representing approximately 38 per cent of all rural children.[9]

Existing research has focused on the care deficit facing children who stay back, arguing that although migration can improve the economic conditions of the household in which the child lives, the care deficit arising from parental migration has a negative impact on a child's long-term development. Children are often viewed as "exceptionally vulnerable because their agency to influence the decision to migrate is limited, but being in their formative years, they require great care and support and are affected by the prolonged physical absence of their parents."[10] In some contexts, there is evidence that children who stay back are particularly vulnerable to labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and abuse, and human trafficking, including for sexual and/or labour exploitation and organ trafficking.[11]

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4   The OECD estimates that 36 per cent of all migration is between the countries of the Global South, but also that because much of this migration is undocumented, the scale of South-South migration may be underestimated. The prevalence of South-South migration is partly due to the fact that the costs of migration between the countries of the Global South are often much lower. See World Bank, "South–South Migration versus South–North Migration," *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016 (Third Edition)* ed. Dilip Ratha (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016).

5   The term 'migrant' as used in this Discussion Paper is inclusive of all "people who have moved from their usual place of residence, regardless of their legal status and their motivations for moving." See Meaning of Migrants, "What is the meaning of 'migrants'?" last accessed on 16 June 2023, meaningofmigrants.org.

6   Rasika Jayasuriya, "Can TLM Policies Better Support the Maintenance of Transnational Child-Parent Relationships?" *Children, Human Rights and Temporary Labour Migration: Protecting the Child-Parent Relationship* ed. Rasika Jayasuriya (London: Routledge, 2021).

7   Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind," *Praxis – The Fletcher Journal of Human Security* Vol. 26 (2011): 24–37.

8   Khatia Antia, Johannes Boucsein, Andreas Deckert, Peter Dambach, Justina Račaitė, Genė Šurkienė, Thomas Jaenisch, Olaf Horstick, and Volker Winkler, "Effects of International Labour Migration on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Left-Behind Children: A Systematic Literature Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* Vol. 17 Issue 12 (2020): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124335.

9   National Working Committee on Children and Women, National Bureau of Statistics, and UNICEF, *Children in China: An Atlas of Social Indicators* (UNICEF, 2018).

10   International Office of Migration (IOM) Bangladesh and Save the Children, *Special Cost of Migration on Children Left Behind: Research Summary* (Dhaka: IOM Bangladesh, 2018), p. v.

11   Council of Europe, Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, "Impact of labour migration on left-behind children," October 2020, https://pace.coe.int/en/files/28741/html.

The existing literature also highlights the negative mental health consequences of parental migration on children who stay back,[12] suggesting that those with mothers abroad fare worse emotionally than those with only fathers abroad, even though mothers are more likely to maintain contact with their children and to remit resources specifically aimed at improving their well-being.[13] Further, it has been argued that parental migration can increase social problems for those children who stay back. These problems include an increase in juvenile crime as well as susceptibility to drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and sexual and physical violence.[14] These problems are attributed to a lack of parental involvement in child development, reduced family control and supervision, weakened parental support and guidance, and poor parent-child bonding.

Much of the literature thus emphasizes the negative consequences of parental migration, albeit with some recognition of the potential benefits of remittances, especially for children's education. Implicit in this research is the assumption that children who are left behind are abandoned by parent(s) who act in a self-interested way. The literature suggests that new social inequalities are reproduced through labour migration, even where there are material gains at the household level. Indeed, some studies have concluded that parental migration is entirely detrimental to the health of left behind children and adolescents, with no evidence of any benefit.[15]

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12 See, for example, Artjoms Ivlevs, Milena Nikolova, and Carol Graham, "Emigration, Remittances, and the Subjective Well-Being of Those Staying Behind," *Journal of Population Economics* Vol. 32 Issue 1 (2019): 113–51; Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind"; IOM Bangladesh and Save the Children, *Special Cost of Migration on Children Left Behind;* J. Cheng and Y-H. Sun, "Depression and Anxiety among Left-behind Children in China: A Systematic Review," *Child: Care, Health and Development* Vol. 41 Issue 4 (2015): 515–23; Kolitha Wickramage, Chesmal Siriwardhana, Puwalani Vidanapathirana, Sulochana Weerawarna, Buddhini Jayasekara, Gayani Pannala, Anushka Adikari, et al, "Risk of Mental Health and Nutritional Problems for Left-behind Children of International Labor Migrants," *BMC Psychiatry* Vol. 15 Issue 1 (2015): 1–12; Mona Dillon and Christine A. Walsh, "Left Behind: The Experiences of Children of the Caribbean Whose Parents Have Migrated," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* Vol. 43 Issue 6 (2012): 871–902; Rachel Marcus, Carmen León-Himmelstine, Thaís de Carvalho, and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, *Children Who Stay behind in Latin America and the Caribbean While Parents Migrate*; Wei Wu, Guangbo Qu, Lingling Wang, Xue Tang, and Ye-Huan Sun, "Meta-Analysis of the Mental Health Status of Left-behind Children in China," *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* Vol. 55 Issue 3 (2019): 260–70; Ya Wen and Jingrong Xie, "Missing Families and Villages: The Care Deficit Faced by Rural Left-behind Children in China and Its Implications," *International Journal of Care and Caring* Vol. 3 Issue 2 (2019): 247–62; Y. Zheng, "Psychological Consequences of Parental Migration for Left-Behind Children," *Positive Mental Health, Fighting Stigma and Promoting Resiliency for Children and Adolescents* eds. Matthew Hodes and Susan Gau (San Diego: Academic Press, 2016).

13 Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind"; Victor Cebotari and Bilisuma B. Dito, "Internal and International Parental Migration and the Living Conditions of Children in Ghana," *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 121 (2021): 1–10; Ying Xu, Di Xu, Sandra Simpkins, and Mark Warschauer, "Does It Matter Which Parent Is Absent? Labor Migration, Parenting, and Adolescent Development in China," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* Vol. 28 Issue 6 (2019): 1635–49.

14 Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind."

15 Gracia Fellmeth, Kelly Rose-Clarke, Chenyue Zhao, Laura K Busert, Yunting Zheng, Alessandro Massazza, Hacer Sonmez, et al, "Health Impacts of Parental Migration on Left-behind Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *The Lancet* Vol. 392 Issue 10164 (2018): 2567–82.

3. Why We Should Move Away from "Children Left Behind"

According to UNICEF, the phrase "children left behind" refers to "children raised in their home countries or in their countries of habitual residence, who have been left behind by adult migrants responsible for them."[16] One or both parents may leave their children with family members, friends, the wider community, a childcare institution, or on their own. Leaving children in a country of origin, for short or extended periods of time, is common, particularly in countries with seasonal migration due to agriculture.[17]

UNICEF recognizes that the phrase "children left behind" must be used with care to avoid stigmatizing children whose caregivers have migrated, demonizing the caregivers for leaving even when it is to provide for their children, or creating the impression that these children necessarily experience negative emotional or psychological impacts. UNICEF also acknowledges that for most parents, leaving in order to provide for their families is a difficult, but rational choice.[18]

Notwithstanding this acknowledgment of the need for caution, we argue that the phrase "children left behind" should be abandoned altogether. Our evidence from the MIDEQ Hub's research with parents and children in four very different contexts – Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nepal – suggests that using the term "left behind" is a misnomer which mischaracterizes the experiences and needs of children who stay back when their parents migrate, as well as their wider households. Critically, we argue that the "left behind" term can, and often does, negatively impact the framing and delivery of research, programming, and policy work. Our reasoning is as follows.[19]

Firstly, the term "left behind" implies abandonment of household members rather than the use of migration as a household strategy.

Migration is often a household strategy in the Global South, with the decision to migrate often a reaction to longstanding structural inequalities which limit the livelihood options available to parents to support their children and other family members.[20] For Central American families, for example, the contemporary reality of one or both parents migrating for work is the lived consequences of historical economic, political, and physical landscapes of violence and exploitation.[21] In West Africa, those who stay back play their part in an explicit household strategy, where some children stay at home because of their role in supporting the household or agricultural activities.[22] Indeed, in some sense, migration can happen only because some stay back, maintaining the household of the migrants in the communities of origin and fulfilling tasks and roles due to the absence of certain individuals.

Evidence from MIDEQ's research into the multiple and overlapping interactions among migration and other family and societal processes confirms that context is essential in predicting how parental absence through migration may affect child well-being.[23] Parents make strategic decisions about how to maximize the income and opportunities available to the household, given the often-limited resources available to them. One of these resources is the existence of extended family and community care networks which can provide support to children in their absence.[24] Parental migration does not inherently entail abandonment, rather the responsibility of care passes on to other households or family members – normally individuals who were already involved in the provision of care prior to the parent's migration, for example another parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or sibling (see Box 1).[25]

16   UNICEF, *Children 'Left Behind*'', UNICEF Working Paper (UNICEF, n.d.), p. 1.
17   Ibid.
18   Ibid.
19   In addition, the terminology of "left behind" to refer to children who live in migrant households can become confused with the commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to "leave no one behind." The concern not to leave children behind in relation to delivery of the SDGs is a very different concept than "children left behind" in migrant households. This further supports the need for a change in terminology.
20   Michael Clemens and Timothy Ogden, "Migration as a Strategy for Household Finance: A Research Agenda on Remittances, Payments, and Development," *Working Paper 354* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2014).
21   Mirna Carranza, "The Cost of 'A Better Life': Children Left Behind - Beyond Ambiguous Loss," *Journal of Family Issues* Vol. 43 Issue 12 (2022): 3218–43.
22   Nathalie Mondain and Alioune Diagne, "Discerning the Reality of 'Those Left Behind' in Contemporary Migration Processes in Sub-Saharan Africa: Some Theoretical Reflections in the Light of Data from Senegal," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* Vol. 34 Issue 5 (2013): 503–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.827831.
23   Franziska Gassmann, Melissa Siegel, Michaella Vanore, and Jennifer Waidler, "Unpacking the Relationship between Parental Migration and Child Well-Being: Evidence from Moldova and Georgia," *Child Indicators Research* Vol. 11 (2018): 423–40.
24   Yinni Peng and Odalia M. H. Wong, "Who Takes Care of My Left-Behind Children? Migrant Mothers and Caregivers in Transnational Child Care," *Journal of Family Issues* Vol. 37 Issue 14 (2016): 2021–44.
25   Nathalie Mondain and Alioune Diagne, "Discerning the Reality of 'Those Left Behind' in Contemporary Migration Processes in Sub-Saharan Africa."

Box 1. "One Hand Does not Pick up Flour"

It is clear from MIDEQ's research with children in migrant households In Burkina Faso that parental migration does not mean abandonment. Children who stay back, indeed even those in non-migrant households, are perceived as belonging to, and being the responsibility of, all the members of the family and household, even of the entire community. This is embodied by a popular saying in Burkina Faso: "One hand does not pick up flour." In other words, it is necessary to pool the efforts of all family and household members in raising a child.

Given that children are already deeply embedded in care systems which extend beyond the nuclear family, children who stay back in Burkina Faso are not abandoned when their parents or caregivers migrate. The care of children who stay back is thus not ruptured upon migration but rather continues through the system already in place. A child who stayed back described this network of care:

> You can have a biological dad, but you cannot just have one dad, you have little dads [the biological father's younger brothers] and grand dads [the biological father's older brothers] who stayed with you here [in Burkina Faso]. If it is the little one or the grand dad who stayed at home here, he is the one who's going to take care of you, he is the one who's going to take care of your school, he is the one who will take your report cards at school.

A non-parent head of household similarly conveyed this sense of belonging with children who stayed back: "The children [who stay back] also belong to me."

However, the MIDEQ data also indicates that stay back children are treated differently than other children in the family. For example, one child respondent told us: "No, it's not the same. They [extended family care givers] can give money to others and not to me. If your bike breaks, you fix it yourself. At the same time, their father repairs it for [his children] ... Your father is not there, or your mother. They are hurting you. You are not getting food. Even taking a bath is difficult."

In other cases, only one parent migrates. In Nepal, for example, it is usually the father who migrates and the mother, along with the extended family of the husband, takes on the responsibility for childcare (Box 2). In Ethiopia, almost all children consulted during the course of the MIDEQ research had a male relative or family member of their migrant father take over the responsibility of looking after them.

Box 2. Migration as a Household Strategy

MIDEQ's research in Nepal shows that the main aspiration for migration is welfare of the family. The remittances are used for the well-being of the whole family, including children: for better houses, better food, improved healthcare, and assets the household can depend upon when needed. Remittances can also provide children with a better future: an English medium education, better amenities in life, better chances after marriage (due to a good dowry), and better career opportunities. Family well-being and the well-being of children is one of the main aspirations of fathers who migrate.

Care of children after the father migrates falls not only on the mother but also equally on grandparents, uncles, and aunts, meaning that migration does not lead to abandonment of children since they are embedded within the larger family structure.

In other words, rather than treating parental migration as a key distinguishing factor that *determines* deprivation, it is important to understand how parental migration is accommodated in family life.

Our concern is that the abandonment narrative has left the expansive care systems which support children who stay back in the Global South less likely to be examined, as well as ignoring parents' motivation for migration – which is to improve their household's well-being in communities of origin. As a result, important points of intervention for supporting children who stay back, such as the extended family, are not taken advantage of in programming. This is a point to which we will return.

Secondly, focusing solely or primarily on ameliorating the impacts of parental migration on children ignores the wider political and policy contexts within which families become separated.

It is often necessary for children to stay back because the costs of migration are too high, bilateral labour agreements and visa regimes do not allow families to move, and the migration journey can be dangerous. There is also a myriad of other reasons with roots in systemic inequalities. Often, policies reduce migrants to units of labour, from whom employers are able to maximize economic benefits, exploiting them to work long hours without accommodating their family commitments. In other words, without being responsible for, or taking into account, the costs of social reproduction. MIDEQ's research in Egypt, Jordan, and Nepal confirms that the decision to migrate alone reflects systemic disadvantages in the migration system which prevent children from accompanying their parents (Box 3).

Thirdly, the term "left behind" pathologizes and stigmatizes both migrant parents and their children.

As is acknowledged by UNICEF, one of the issues associated with the term "left behind" children is that it can stigmatize children whose parents have migrated and demonize their parents for leaving. Without their "real" parents (especially mothers) to rear and guide them, stay back children are perceived to bear the brunt of the social costs of migration. For example, it is feared that the children will become delinquents, drug addicts, or school dropouts, and that they will be emotionally scarred.[26] MIDEQ's research in Ethiopia highlights the stigma faced by children in migrant families (Box 4).

Box 3. The Decision to Migrate Alone

There are numerous restrictions that hinder Egyptians from taking their families with them when they migrate to Jordan. Jordan imposes strict requirements, primarily mandating that Egyptian men be registered with the Social Security Corporation to demonstrate stable employment, earn a monthly income exceeding US$490, or possess investor status. Even if these conditions are met, the Jordanian authorities retain discretionary power to deny entry to the worker's family. In fact, in recent years, there has been a restriction on families accompanying Egyptian migrant workers to Jordan.[27]

These restrictions, together with the high costs of living and healthcare in Jordan compared to Egypt, and the significant disparity in the exchange rate between the currencies of the two countries, mean that the majority of Egyptian migrants do not bring their families with them. Moreover, Egyptian migrants, particularly those working in the arduous agricultural sector where they constitute the majority, must be prepared for physically demanding tasks and exceedingly long working hours. Workers often reside in difficult living conditions, sharing concrete huts located near the fields which are inappropriate for the raising and care of children.

In Nepal, where labour migration to the Gulf countries and Malaysia is largely contractual, parents are not allowed to take children with them. Here, as in Jordan, it is usually men who migrate. Even when both parents migrate, they are housed in sex-disaggregated accommodation and their daily lives are separately structured, with employment often provided by different employers. Women are not allowed to give birth in the Gulf countries under contractual labour migration arrangements. If they do, the child is not recognized by the destination country and thus cannot access education or other services. As a result, it is common in Nepal that only one parent migrates. Where both parents migrate, children live with grandparents, aunts, and uncles as part of the larger family care structure.

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26   Maruja M. B. Asis, "Living with Migration: Experiences of Left-behind Children in the Philippines," *Asian Population Studies* Vol. 2 Issue 1 (2006): 45–67.
27   Duaa Ajarmeh, Rawan Rbihat, Dalia Haddad, and Maysara Damagh, "Egyptian Workers in Jordan," *MIDEQ Working Paper* (Amman: MIDEQ, 2023).

Box 4. Prejudice and Opportunity in Education among Children in Ethiopia

Parents who migrate to South Africa from Ethiopia's Hadiya region invest their remittances, as well as money upon their return, into the education of their children. As a result, children from migration households, including the children of return migrants and those currently staying back, often attend expensive private schools. The tuition fees are largely only affordable for the children of individuals who have migrated abroad. Indeed, the region has seen a significant increase in private schools catering to migrant households, with many current and former international migrants often serving as investors and owners of these schools.

MIDEQ's data shows that children who stay back when their parents migrate are also more easily able to financially access additional educational support, such as paid tutoring. A child from a non-migrant household voiced this inequality: "Our parents can hardly afford the essential school goods such as notebooks and stationery let alone pay for a tutor. Most of the kids coming from migrant households have private tutors."

However, children who stayed back also encountered prejudice in the school system. Many key informants, including school principals and teachers, claimed that children who stayed back had discipline issues – which some connected to their greater interest in migration as a future livelihood strategy, rather than education. A 14-year-old child described his own experience with such biases: "I do not get where all these biases towards us come from! Our teachers and local society consider us to be undisciplined and disinterested in education. There is a prejudice that we all want to end up in South Africa, where our parents are. We are not treated well by our teachers and the school community."

This discouraging school environment can constrain the educational opportunities that parental migration may produce for children who stay back.

In many countries, an initial policy obstacle will be to overcome the public's misperceptions about children who stay back and parents who migrate without their children.[28] Research from China, for example, notes that the hukou (household registration system), which was put in place in the 1950s to control population mobility within China, makes it very difficult for Chinese citizens to access certain benefits, including hospitals, schools, or land-purchasing rights, unless they are from that area.[29] Parents therefore choose not to take their children with them because they cannot access the social care system in the places to which they migrate. Despite this, migrant parents whose children stay back in villages, are often depicted as irresponsible parents who could not measure up against normative parenthood. A related discourse frames parental absence due to migration as negligence or abandonment of jianhuren zhize (guardianship responsibilities) altogether. This image of irresponsible parents is deeply gendered.[30]

In addition to dealing with stigma, Save the Children has found that children in migrant households are sometimes viewed as privileged and not vulnerable.[31] Some people even refer to these children as "barrel children" because of the cardboard containers filled with goods that they receive

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28 Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind."
29 Xiaorong Gu, "'Save the Children!': Governing Left-behind Children through Family in China's Great Migration," *Current Sociology Monograph* Vol. 70 Issue 4 (2022): 513–38.
30 Ibid.
31 Séverine Jacomy Vité, *Empowered to Cope: Children Left Behind* (Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden, 2008).

from their parents several times a year.[32] MIDEQ research in Nepal shows that communities often look at these children as being spoiled since they are more privileged than other children in terms of material goods.[33] There is also stigmatization against the family that they try to fill the gap of absence of one of the parents by providing them with more material goods than is needed and by parents being flexible to their demands. As a result, there may be community resistance to stay back children being given community support or government assistance which can hinder the success of programmes and policies focusing on this group.

Fourthly, the term "left behind" flattens out the experiences of children and fails to recognize their agency.

It is important to recognize that the experiences and characteristics of children who stay back are broad and heterogenous. Children in migrant households range from one day up to 18 years of age, and live in countries with diverse economic, political, and social structures. Some children live in rural areas while others live in urban areas. Sometimes one parent stays behind with the children; sometimes both migrate. Some children are left behind for months while others are left behind for years.[34] Some parents may visit regularly, while others have yet to ever return.

There are also substantial differences in the impact of parents' departure on children, depending on who is leaving, whether it is both parents or just one of them, and what his/her role in the family was before the departure, in addition to other factors. Other differences relate to whether the parent's employment abroad is legal, short term or long term, the existence or level of remittances, the possibility of reunification, regularity of communication, and who the

caregivers are in their absence. As noted above, the context within which parental migration takes place has a considerable influence on the well-being of the children who stay back and the household in which they live.

The term "left behind" not only flattens out the experiences of children in migrant households; it also implies that such children are the passive recipients of migration decisions and the impacts of parental migration – that they have been simply abandoned in the migration process.[35] This assumption of passivity is challenged by evidence from MIDEQ's research. For example, MIDEQ research in Nepal finds that older adolescent children often start thinking that they should substitute the migrant father and start earning for the family. As one respondent told us: "My father has worked for a long time in Saudi for us. It is now my turn to let him take a rest. I will now earn for the family to ease his burden." It is therefore important that children are understood as social actors and holders of rights, rather than being narrowly defined and viewed as passive and entirely dependent on the family.

Finally, and reflecting the points made above, the "left behind" child is another version of the "poor child," which is often measured against, and reformed towards, an idealized and unitary child subject.[36]

Despite much of the world's migration occurring in Global South contexts, discussions on children who stay back when their parents or primary carers migrate are often rooted in Global North perspectives and biases. Global processes of knowledge production have contributed towards promoting the prevalence of the universal English term "left-behind children," and its connotations, worldwide.[37] The roots of the term constrict its applicability since most children who stay back do not reside in the Global North.

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32 In the Caribbean, children waiting to reunite with their migrant parents are often referred to as "barrel children," a term coined by Jamaican social workers in the twentieth century and used across the larger islands of the English-speaking Caribbean. The phrase originated in reference to the cardboard barrels used to ship consumer goods to family members back on the islands. Interestingly, the term is used very loosely to refer to all children whose parents migrate, whether or not they receive material support from their migrant parents. Recently, mainly in the case of Jamaica, some parents are sending money through wire transfers rather than sending material goods. Thus, the children are also being called 'remittance children.' See Mala Jokhan, "Exploring the Barrel Children Cycle: Parent-Child Separation Due to Migration," *Childhood Explorer*, 2017, https://www.childhoodexplorer.org/exploring-the-barrel-children-cycle-parentchild-separation-due-to-migration.

33 The MIDEQ Hub's researchers in Nepal have worked with Positive Negatives to produce an animation and educational resources which draw on the research findings. *The Boy with More?* explores the sometimes contradictory impacts of parental migration on children, including the fact that children who stay back are perceived as having more material possessions and opportunities. The animation can be viewed at https://positivenegatives.org/story/mideq-2/the-boy-with-more/.

34 Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind."

35 Nathalie Mondain and Alioune Diagne, "Discerning the Reality of 'Those Left Behind' in Contemporary Migration Processes in Sub-Saharan Africa."

36 Lucy Hopkins and Arathi Sriprakash, *The "Poor Child": The Cultural Politics of Education, Development and Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

37 Manfred Liebel, *Decolonizing Childhoods: From Exclusion to Dignity* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020); Manfred Liebel and Rebecca Budde, "Other Children, Other Youth: Against Eurocentrism in Childhood and Youth Research," *Children Out of Place and Human Rights* eds. Antonella Invernizzi, Manfred Liebel, Brian Milne, and Rebecca Budde, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

In an important article on normative understandings of left behind children, Guo highlights the problems of this category construction and usage around children and family. These categories primarily treat Western forms of childhood as the normative standard while treating non-Western forms of childhood as non-normative.[38] He argues that this produces an interpretation of non-Western childhood and family forms as deviant and negatively impacting children. In particular, the narrative of abandonment comes from Global North notions of what constitutes an ideal childhood – namely being raised by biological parents in a nuclear household.[39] As noted above, this notion often lacks applicability in Global South contexts where the ideal childhood is one embedded in extensive kin networks, and where the roles and responsibilities of children are often very different to those in the Global North.

Our call to rethink the term "children left behind" is therefore part of a broader shift that challenges the ways in which childhood is conceptualized in migration work. The categories of childhood and child that underpin child migration work requires a rethinking and, in fact, a decentering.[40] In particular, we want to highlight the dangers of uncritically adopting terms which carry with them problematic assumptions. These problematic assumptions in turn subtly impose ways of thinking in the Global North to the Global South which produces biased, inaccurate, and ineffective programming, policies, and sources of knowledge production. We also want to highlight the structural inequalities associated with migration which lead families to become separated in the first place.

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38 Kaidong Guo, "Reframing 'Left-behind' Children: Normative Understandings, Local Practices and Socio-Economic Hierarchies," Reimagining Childhood Studies, 19 Jan 2022, https://reimaginingchildhoodstudies.com/reframing_left-behind_children/.
39 Ibid.
40 Spyros Spyrou, "Time to Decenter Childhood?" *Childhood* Vol. 24 Issue 4 (2017): 433–37.

4. The Experiences of Children Who Stay Back

Children's Voices and Perspectives

Our starting point for changing how we think about children in migrant households is the children themselves. Children's voices and perspectives often reveal that the implications of parental migration are more complex than the neat delineations of trade-offs between costs (reduced parental care) and benefits (remittances) suggest.

For example, research with children living in rural regions of China's eastern interior found that parental migration had become a new normal and a good future was one that involved escaping rurality and progressing to a stable urban job through education.[41] Some children did not feel left behind but enjoyed close relationships with their migrant parents and grandparent caregivers, also perceiving that their parents' migration supported their studies.[42] The findings reveal that affection and the provision of material goods intertwine in children's feelings about their family relationships, lives, and prospects. Moreover, tracking evolutions in children's feelings about their care further complicates any dichotomization of care and money in cost-benefit analyses of migration.[43]

Contrary to dominant understandings of the impacts of migration on children, work conducted by MIDEQ researchers in Egypt reveals that families, including children, often exhibit a preference for migration and the absence of the father. In some areas it is common to find villages where every household has experienced the migration of one of the male members of the family, typically the father, husband, or older brother. In such cases, the mother, in collaboration with the grandfather or uncle, assumes more responsibility for the children and their well-being. The field research indicates that some children regard their uncle as a second father. Additionally,

the children themselves eagerly anticipate reaching adulthood to follow in their father's footsteps and embark on a journey for work, particularly the boys. They maintain strong bonds with their parents and rejoice in their father's presence during holidays, when he is able to return, recognizing him as one of the most influential figures in their lives: "My father is the one who gives me the most hope, and he always makes me happy and tells me, 'Your gift is whatever you want,' and he always advises me and calls me on the phone."

In Ethiopia, the children who stayed back were observed by MIDEQ researchers to have a contextual understanding of parental migration. Employing ethnographic research methods is particularly important in research dealing with children, considering the inaccessibility of children's views, and in studies concerned with interrogating normative ideas regarding childhood.[44] Such child-centered approaches in research prioritize the inclusion of children's voices in research and discourage stereotypes of children as helpless victims.[45]

These findings highlight the need to foreground children's own perceptions on their experiences staying back, and to prioritize children's perspectives rather than adults' viewpoints. This can work towards decentring the children "left behind" narrative. That children who stay back continue to interact with larger family networks and engage with parents even after migration helps bridge conceptual dichotomies between migrants and non-migrants and between those who stay back and other children.[46]

Taking the children's perspective, we get a glimpse of how children make sense of the challenges and opportunities presented by their parents' migration and how they grow from the experience.

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41   Rachel Murphy, "What Does 'Left behind' Mean to Children Living in Migratory Regions in Rural China?" *Geoforum* Vol. 129 (2022): 181–190.
42   Ibid.
43   Ibid.
44   Dorte Thorsen and Imam Hashim, *Child Migration in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2011).
45   Pirkko Siklander, Eeva-Liisa Kronqvist, Sanna Järvelä, Elina Määttä, Arttu Mykkänen, and Kristiina Mänty, "Interactive and Child-Centred Research Methods for Investigating Efficacious Agency of Children," *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* Vol. 31 (2014): 82–107.
46   Ibid.

Box 5. Perspectives of Children on Parental Absence in Nepal

While children in Nepal miss their father as they are growing up, he is often respected for undergoing the hardship of migration in the interests of the family's well-being. During MIDEQ research interviews in Nepal, children often brought up the fact that the father faces hardships in the destination country for the good of the children's future. They often shared that their career prospects are better and life is good due to the father's migration. And they feel obliged to fulfill their father's aspirations for them. As one respondent stated: "[Children] study well so they can get a good job and can take care of the family when the father is old." Moreover, in places where women are not digitally literate, it is often the children who help mothers use apps to communicate with their husband. One mother commented: "My son is very smart with the mobile phone, he calls his father and hands the phone to me." Thus, it is the children who are often in communication with the parents and can facilitate communication between them.

The Need for Nuance

As noted above, there are important differences in the types of migration and circumstances of the children in migrant households.

Firstly, there are significant differences in the experiences of children that depend on children's identities and household dynamics. In Ghana, evidence suggests that the living conditions of girls deteriorate when parents migrate, mainly due to increased domestic work and frequent changes in care arrangements that affect girls more often than boys. Ghanaian girls are also more likely to experience poorer health and happiness outcomes when parents migrate internally or internationally.[47] This is most likely to be the case where mothers, as opposed to fathers, migrate. In Mexico, by contrast, there is evidence that the allocation of resources in households tend to favour girls when family members migrate.[48] Differences in family circumstances can have significant implications for children's well-being in migrant households. Family break-up and divorce also nuance the effects of parental migration and children's living conditions.[49]

Secondly, the nature, prevalence, and duration of migration are important differentiating factors. Children's living conditions in Ghana, for example, have been found to be more volatile when parents migrate internally, compared with children whose parents have migrated internationally, highlighting the poor opportunities that internal migration in Ghana may provide.[50] The out-migration of family members appears less traumatic in countries where migration is more common, indicating that people in such contexts might be able to cope better with separation.[51]

These differentiating factors mean that the experiences of children in migrant households cannot be easily or neatly categorized as either positive or negative. While the literature highlights the negative impacts of parental migration, there is growing evidence that children in migrant households can also cope with migration and at times benefit from it. Research from the Philippines, for example, has shown that although migration creates emotional displacement for migrants and their children, it also opens up possibilities for children's agency and independence.[52]

Remittances have also been found to contribute significantly to livelihood improvements for migrant workers' families. Remittances sent home by parents can increase consumption, finance schooling, pay health care, and fund

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47   Victor Cebotari and Bilisuma B. Dito, "Internal and International Parental Migration and the Living Conditions of Children in Ghana," *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 121 (2021): 1–10.

48   Francisca M. Antman, "Gender, Educational Attainment, and the Impact of Parental Migration on Children Left Behind," *Journal of Population Economics* Vol. 25 Issue 4 (2012): 1187–1214.

49   Ibid.

50   However, it is likely that parents who migrate internationally have greater economic, social, and educational resources compared with those who migrate internally, for whom the costs are lower.

51   Artjoms Ivlevs, Milena Nikolova, and Carol Graham, "Emigration, Remittances, and the Subjective Well-Being of Those Staying Behind," *Journal of Population Economics* Vol. 32 Issue1 (2019): 113–51.

52   Maruja M. B. Asis, "Living with Migration: Experiences of Left-behind Children in the Philippines," *Asian Population Studies* Vol. 2 Issue 1 (2006): 45–67.

better housing. There is evidence, for example, that parental migration can have a positive impact on the children's school attendance and their educational attainment levels.[53] MIDEQ researchers in Burkina Faso found that children who stay back were slightly less likely to have their schooling interrupted (5.4 per cent compared to 9.1 per cent).

Furthermore, children who stayed back and received remittances had higher school attendance rates: 59 per cent of children in households that received remittances were enrolled in school compared with 40 per cent of children who stayed back in households that did not receive remittances. MIDEQ researchers in Nepal also found that whilst facing social challenges and stigma, children who stay back also benefit from additional resources made available through remittances to support their education (Box 6).

This evidence highlights the importance of developing more contextualized understandings of what it means to be a child who is part of a migrant household and "stays back."[54] There is a need for analytical approaches which incorporate economic, social, religious, and cultural diversity, not least because not all children experiencing transnational family arrangements will react in the same way. Psychological outcomes may be affected by sociocultural contexts in countries of origin, especially where local social norms favouring extended family involvement in childrearing challenge models of attachment devised in Global North settings.[55] In other words, debates and policy responses in relation to children in migrant households need to move beyond the question of *whether* children benefit or suffer from parental migration to understanding *the circumstances* under which children are most able to cope with family migration, and benefit from it.[56]

Box 6. The Emotional Needs and Behaviours of Children Who Stay Back in Nepal

Due to the lack of good employment opportunities in Nepal, remigration or migration for long periods is common. Parents are thus often absent for a long time from the lives of their children. This sometimes has negative impacts on children who stay back.

According to parents and teachers, there is a noticeable difference between children whose parents have migrated and those whose parents have not. When young, the migration of the mother affects the children who stay back much more than the migration of the father. However, for adolescents, the impact of a father migrating is more significant. Key informants observed that in order to cope with the absence of parents and the pressure from the wider community, adolescents, children, and particularly male children, sometimes use negative coping strategies such as dropping out of school, having high absenteeism rates, and entering into drug and alcohol addiction.

Despite evidence of the negative impacts of migration on children who stay back, it is clear that there are also positive impacts, as a result of the improved economic conditions that the household experiences and access to better education and healthcare. The opportunities afforded by migration have brought confidence in children and encouraged them to aspire for higher studies or aim for subjects that are more expensive, but which also lead to better knowledge and career opportunities (for example as doctors, engineers, or chartered accountants) or allow them to secure better jobs abroad (for example, in hotel or hospital management).

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53 See, for example, Alina Botezat and Friedhelm Pfeiffer, "The Impact of Parental Labour Migration on Left-behind Children's Educational and Psychosocial Outcomes: Evidence from Romania," *Population, Space and Place* Vol. 26 Issue 2 (2020): 1–17.

54 Elspeth Graham and Lucy P. Jordan, "Migrant Parents and the Psychological Well-Being of Left-Behind Children in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* Vol. 73 Issue 4 (2011): 763–87.

55 Ibid.

56 Yao Lu, "Parental Migration and Well-Being of Left-Behind Children from a Comparative Perspective," *Parenting from Afar and the Reconfiguration of Family Across Distance* eds. Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, Jill Brown, and Carolyn Pope Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Care Beyond Borders

Due to the fact that children are often unable to migrate with their parents, there are a growing number of transnational families where children are geographically separated from one or both parents over an extended period. As a result, transnational migration between the countries of the Global South (as well as between the Global South and Global North) is creating new family forms and arrangements.

As noted earlier, the term "left behind children" often implies abandonment. In Chinese media discourse, for example, migrant parents' physical absence is synonymous with a complete loss of connection with their children. As such, children in this narrative are often depicted as tearful victims harbouring a hunger for a reconnection with their parents.[57]

These narratives, which often play into prejudicial views on parents from the Global South – ones which often view them as unfit or worse than their Global North counterparts – are challenged by a growing literature that explores social media and telephone-mediated communications between migrant parents and children who stay back in sending communities.[58] Evidence on transnational parenting has documented the efforts of migrants from the Global South to parent across distance.[59] Children who stay back can continue to communicate with their parents, to varying degrees of regularity, after their parents have left, and parents can remain active participants in their children's lives (Boxes 7 and 8).

With technological advances, such as smart phones and social media, communication is now in real time. This ability to rapidly communicate suggests that separated families are able to make decisions in timely ways and have increased knowledge and involvement in the day-to-day. In addition, the real time and visual elements of video chat technology have added a level of intimacy that was not present with letters and photos, thus enhancing the relationships of transnational families.[60]

Box 7. Parenting across Borders in the Egypt–Jordan Corridor

Egyptian migrants to Jordan do not view their migration as abandoning their children – nor do their children view the migration as abandonment. Indeed, the aspirations of Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan are often centred around their children who stay back, such as building a house for their children and preparing daughters for marriage. Some also said that returning to their children and family is their most important future aspiration. As one father stated: "All I want is to return and settle back in Egypt surrounded by my children and to make a living." Egyptian migrants' commitment to their children who stayed back led such children to view migration as one which was mutually beneficial, as well: "I would choose for [my father] to travel in order for him to work and fulfil his dreams and see what he wants to become and get us what we want."

These parents often use migration to better care for their children who stayed back in Egypt. Migration allows them to send remittances that improve the economic situation of the household, and in turn enable parents to pay for things, such as private education and medication for their children. Egyptian migrants in Jordan maintain not just an exchange of goods, but also constant communication with their children, given the availability of various methods of communication. Parents were thus present in their children's lives despite the distance, with care provision continuing across borders.

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57   Xiaorong Gu, "'Save the Children!': Governing Left-behind Children through Family in China's Great Migration," *Current Sociology Monograph* Vol. 70 Issue 4 (2022): 513–38.

58   Ibid.

59   Celine Meyers and Pragna Rugunanan, "Mobile-Mediated Mothering from a Distance: A Case Study of Somali Mothers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 23 Issue 5 (2020): 656–73.

60   Mirna Carranza, "The Cost of 'A Better Life': Children Left Behind - Beyond Ambiguous Loss."

Box 8. Communication Technology and Long-distance Parenting in Ethiopia

Communication technology is playing a significant role in the long-distance parenting of Ethiopian children born in migrant households. Most children coming from migrant households own mobile phones – unlike their counterparts in non-migrant households. As a result, they often communicate with their migrant fathers through various call apps like WhatsApp, Imo, and Viber. A 14-year-old boy whose father was in South Africa stated: "My father tries his best to make us not feel abandoned by him. Every night he calls us on WhatsApp and makes sure to talk to me and my younger sister, asking us how our day was."

A 12-year-old girl whose father was also in South Africa explained the value of mobile phones: "Most of the time our teachers and other parents complain that mobile phones are destructive and inappropriate for kids our age. But for children like myself who miss the presence of one of their parents, mobile phones are our only channel of communication with our loved ones."

Moreover, in contexts such as Nepal, technology has been harnessed to enable fathers to maintain active participation in their children's education, even when they are not physically present in the country (Box 9).

From Passivity to Agency

Finally, it is important and necessary to move away from the term "left behind" because using the term removes the agency from children who stay back. The experiences of children who stay back are reduced to the actions of their parents, rather than their own. In addition, the enforced passivity placed on children who stay back connotates a permanently immobile state for this group. These children remain left until their parents return; they are not seen as possessing the agency required to move.

An alternative view is to see children as agents or actors who can exert some agency in shaping their experiences within migrant households, rather than as the passive recipients of adult decisions and the various impacts of migration. Research with children in the Philippines and Indonesia, for example, has found that children gradually adapted to their family's situation by taking the first steps towards understanding the reasons for their parents' migration. The accounts of children in migrant households reveal how they grew from passivity or incapacity into increasingly active adolescent agents within the context of their care environments.[61] Resilience was usually articulated by drawing on the discourse that migration was a family livelihood strategy where the family worked hard together so that children could succeed in life. Other evidence suggests that children who stay back actively express agency in how they engage with the consequences of their

Box 9. Fathering through Digital Technology in Nepal

In areas of Nepal where male migration is high, schools noted the depleting presence of the father in children's education and its negative impact. Often, gender and social norms are strict in relation to women's mobility, and it is the father who attends parent-teacher meetings, goes to pick up children's academic reports, and attends to all other required interactions with schools. In the absence of the father, grandfathers and uncles have taken up this role to some extent. However, this is not always possible, for example when the wife of the migrant has moved to an urban area away from the village of origin, when the grandparents are too old, or when uncles also migrate. These challenges, resulting from the absence of fathers in school contexts, has been found to produce poorer educational outcomes. To overcome this challenge, many private schools in the Jhapa and Bardiya districts have begun to use digital technology, particularly apps, to sustain migrant fathers' involvement in school activities. Through the apps, fathers can regularly communicate with teachers, participate in school meetings remotely, and oversee the progress and activities of children in school more generally.

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61   Theodora Lam and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "Parental Migration and Disruptions in Everyday Life: Reactions of Left-behind Children in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 45 Issue 16 (2019): 3085–3104.

parent's migration.[62] For example, children who stay back at times work to maintain intergenerational ties across distances,[63] as well as finding ways to cope with the emotional displacement wrought by parental migration.[64] Efforts to compensate for a parent's absence can also empower children who stay back.[65]

MIDEQ's research has similarly found that many children of migrants understand migration as something that their parents had to do in order to prepare a better future for them. Over time, children learn to adjust to the absence of one or both parents. Indeed, the migration of parents can motivate children who stay back to migrate themselves, negating the assumed permanency of their stay back situation (see Box 10).

Box 10. The Impermanency of Staying Back – Examples from Ethiopia and Egypt

MIDEQ's researchers in Ethiopia found that children who stayed back in the Hadiya region aspired to migrate rather than pursue their studies. These children often work towards realizing their migration dreams, such as by becoming shoe shiners and street vendors. In addition, they gather information and establish a network with other potential child migrants in order to facilitate their transit to different countries. They often actively negotiate and renegotiate with their family the informed decisions they make in sharing or concealing their migration plans. For example, at times they put pressure on their parents to sell assets to cover their migration costs. In some cases, prospective child migrants blackmail their parents with violence or suicide. Those parents who cannot afford to cover the whole cost of migration instead support income generating schemes by, for example, buying motorcycles which prospective child migrants use to work and raise the money to pay for the cost of their migration. The popular saying "Boxer [a Chinese-made motorcycle] has become a new addition to the list of domestic animals in Hadiya" best captures how children who stay back actively build migration capability.

MIDEQ researchers in Egypt found that sons often take on new roles in their parent's absence, as one father explained: "At weddings, for example, it is a tradition in our region to give a certain amount of money to the groom as a gift. After migration, my sons started to do so on my behalf." This research also indicates that some aspects of a child's agency are reinforced by fathers who migrate. For example, the eldest son's behaviour improves because he shares household duties with his mother through the encouragement of the father. His father encourages him to "grow up" and become a "responsible" young man in and for the household. Boys who stay back at times plan for short-term internal migration in the face of their father's absence. For example, some sons do not complete their secondary school, and instead turn to income-generating activities, working with family members or on their land in exchange for a financial reward or compensation. Some may also travel to Egypt's major cities for work, returning to their villages on weekends.

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62   Zihong Deng, Jianli Xing, Ilan Katz, and Bingqin Li, "Children's Behavioral Agency within Families in the Context of Migration: A Systematic Review," *Adolescent Research Review* Vol. 7 Issue 1 (2022): 1–61.
63   Rossitza Guentcheva, "Long Distance Relationships: Children and Migration in Contemporary Bulgaria," *Ethnologia Balkanica* Issue 14 (2010): 49–69.
64   Maruja M. B. Asis, "Living with Migration: Experiences of Left-behind Children in the Philippines," *Asian Population Studies* Vol. 2 Issue 1 (2006): 45–67; Kelly Rose-Clarke, Waewdaw Nambutr, Achara Kongkamud, Wachiraya Lertgrai, Audrey Prost, Songpoom Benyakorn, Muslihah Albakri, Karen Devries, Tatiana Salisbury, and Aree Jampaklay, "Psychosocial Resilience among Left-behind Adolescents in Rural Thailand: A Qualitative Exploration," *Sociology of Health and Illness* Vol. 44 Issue 1 (2022): 147–68.
65   Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu, "Floating Children and Left-Behind Children as Resilient Agents," *Living with Vulnerabilities and Opportunities in a Migration Context: Floating Children and Left-Behind Children in China* eds. Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2016.).

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

There is a growing body of evidence that a range of factors, including age, geographic location, access to social support networks, the overall level of household resources, the frequency and duration of parental migration, and gender, have implications for the experiences of children who stay back. This underscores the difficulties in developing homogenous responses to the problems facing children who stay back and the need to conduct country-specific analyses to discern what assets and challenges children face in different contexts. Nonetheless, it is also clear that the right policy choices can mitigate the risks and maximize the benefits of migration for children.

Based on the findings of our research, we conclude that four overarching considerations should frame any policy approach.

Firstly, it is not realistic for countries in the Global South to stop parents from migrating. Migration is an important household livelihood strategy in many countries, with the potential to contribute to significantly improved outcomes under the right conditions. For many parents, migration is a way to become a better care provider. This strong motivation is unlikely to be mitigated by policies aimed at dissuading migrants.

Secondly, it is not realistic to assume that governments in developing countries have the necessary capacity and resources to develop appropriate policies to address the needs of stay back children. Bilateral and multilateral organizations, civil society, and the private sector have important roles to play in bridging this resource and capacity gap. Enabling a culture of support and recognition of the efforts of migrant families requires partnerships with civil society, the private sector, media, and non-governmental organizations.[66]

Thirdly, there is a scarcity of reliable country-level data on the incidence and magnitude of children in migrant households who stay back. More data and research on the challenges and benefits encountered by children who stay back could help inform better solutions that allow them to thrive.[67] National level data across countries (and when possible, regional and local level data) should be comparable in terms of its definitions and tabulations. Data collection efforts should be sensitive to gender and age differences in order to take into account the nuances of the phenomenon.

Finally, the policy options outlined below should be viewed as general starting points to consider when addressing the context-specific needs of children in migrant households. Each country with significant numbers of children who remain in the country of origin while their parents migrate would benefit from conducting a needs analysis before determining which, if any, of the following policy options would be most feasible and effective to mitigate social and health-related risks, promote resilience, and enable the children of migrants to flourish. It would also be worth considering the creation of a multidimensional intervention framework, with engagement from governments (both migrant-sending and receiving), the labour migration industry, the private sector, civil society, regional governance structures, donors and development partners, and migrant families themselves.

Strengthen Support for Children Who Stay Back

States have obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which compels them to consider the best interests of the child and ensure that s/he has the protection and care necessary for his or her well-being. All States, with the exception of the US and Somalia, are signatories to the CRC. Pursuant to Article 18(2) of the CRC, States are obligated to "render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children."[68] Therefore, an international legal obligation exists for States that have ratified the CRC to understand the needs of children in migrant households and to respond appropriately.[69]

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66   Kolitha Wickramage, Chesmal Siriwardhana, and Sharika Peiris, *"Promoting the Health of Left-Behind Children of Asian Labour Migrants: Evidence for Policy and Action," Issue in Brief No.14* (IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

67   UNICEF, *Children 'Left Behind.'*

68   United Nations, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," Treaty Series Vol. 1577, November 1989.

69   Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind."

Based on the existing evidence, we recommend the following policy actions to ensure that States meet their obligations to stay back children under the CRC:

- Policies must be strengthened in order to secure children's basic social and economic rights. Legislation to regulate child labour must be introduced and strengthened. Policies should be bolstered to better monitor and punish various forms of child abuse. Policies should be oriented at mitigating the psychosocial impacts of migration on children.
- Staying back should be included as a vulnerability factor when assessing a child's needs for social services, and regulations should be established or revised to ensure that these children are not excluded from cash assistance or food programmes on the assumption that remittances can provide adequate care and education. Where necessary, programmes should directly target children of migrant parents and their guardians with support.
- Child protection systems should provide adequate legal protections and assist parents to transfer legal guardianship to caregivers in the country of origin so children can access services and legal aid.
- Countries of origin should develop comprehensive policies to support the families and caregivers of children of migrant workers in their child-rearing responsibilities.
- Working with local communities, States should gather more data on children whose parents have migrated, and migrating families in general, to better understand the challenges and opportunities they face. They should be encouraged and supported to adopt information management systems to monitor both children who receive services and those who are not receiving services.

Provide Pre-departure Support for Parents and Children in Migrant Households

Parents can provide the best care to their children if they are integrated into the social systems of the countries to which they migrate and are able to access services for themselves (such as healthcare and legal remedies), send remittances, maintain contact, and travel legally to visit their children.

It is important to provide pre-departure information for parents and guardians on how to best support their children, highlighting potential emotional and psychological risks they might face, and encouraging parents to maintain regular contact with their children (including through the use of technology). Programmes could undertake mapping and vulnerability assessments of children of migrant families at the pre-departure phase; develop case management or care plans for children who stay back using community participatory approaches; and provide information to prospective migrant families and guidance for primary caregivers of children who stay back.

Provide Support for Children Who Stay Back through Schools and Community-led Initiatives

A broad range of stakeholders, including parents, guardians, teachers, community members, social workers, policymakers, and the private sector, have a part to play in protecting the rights of children who stay back.[70] It is important that educational, healthcare, child protection, and social protection providers are sensitive to the needs of children who stay back and have protocols in place to address child abuse, emotional issues, and other challenges these children might face.

Schools and communities could also set up support programmes focusing on issues such as drug or alcohol abuse, depression, teenage pregnancy, sexual violence, and a variety of other topics. Whilst such programmes might disproportionately impact children in migrant households, they can potentially benefit all children. Increasing after school programmes would also provide additional psychological and educational support. Ideally, teachers would be given some training in what to expect and how to react. The advantage of using teachers is that they already know the children well, and their services could be relatively inexpensive. The disadvantage is that many teachers may already feel overloaded.

In this context, rather than relying on already overstretched teachers, children can be capacitated to devise and lead support programmes. The active participation of children can provide policymakers with a better sense of the problems facing children while also installing in children a sense of autonomy and self-worth. For instance, older children can mentor or tutor younger children in migrant households, or children can design and lead emotional support networks for other children whose parents have migrated abroad.[71] There is also a role for the private sector here, and for community organizations such as temples, mosques, and village level committees.

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70   UNICEF, *Children 'Left Behind.'*
71   Corey Cappelloni, "Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind."

Utilize Technology to Help Migrant Parents Communicate with their Children

There is growing evidence that technological advances, such as smart phones and social media, can support transnational communication and parenting in real time. The visual elements of video chat technology have also added a level of intimacy that was not present with letters and photos, thus enhancing relationships within transnational families.[72]

A number of organizations in a range of geographical contexts are harnessing this technology to help migrants communicate with their children and maintain family relationships. In Indonesia, for example, a programme established by Migrante Anak Pamilya enables the absent parent to choose the child's bedtime story. Even if the parent cannot read the story in person, the child still feels that the parent has participated.[73] In Europe, the No Left Behind Children project encourages parents and children that stay back to build continuous substantial communication through the use of technology. It also develops new educational methods for migrant parents and parental educators.[74]

Lowering telecommunications costs and related technological barriers could enable migrants to connect more frequently with their children. Making remittance transfers more affordable and offering credit schemes to support migrant families would also be of value in reducing financial pressures. Government policies could encourage and stimulate such schemes.

Information Campaigns to Normalize Transnational Parenting and Reduce Stigma

Acceptance by communities of the normalcy of transnational migrant worker families and of transnational parenting may act as a determinant in reducing vulnerability and enabling resiliency among children whose parents are absent owing to migration. Reflecting this, stakeholders need to be educated and trained on the challenges facing children in migrant households, and empower communities to assist children and reduce stigma.

In some contexts, creative solutions have proved effective in normalizing transnational parenting and reducing stigma. For example, people working with the children of migrants in the Philippines have devised a number of interventions that are practical, inexpensive, and applicable to other countries. Researchers, NGO workers, and government officials consulted during the preparation of this report all proposed using radio, television, schools, magazines, predeparture seminars, and migrant organizations to share advice and information on the care of migrants' children.

Create More Opportunities for Migrant Families to be Together

The policy options outlined above are intended to address the consequences of children being separated from their parents. Ultimately, however, safeguarding the rights of children who stay back means ensuring they are central to policy discussions on labour migration and migration management.[75] As noted by UNICEF, children in migrant families are directly impacted by regulations limiting the movement of families. Despite mentions of family unity, international and interregional frameworks, agreements, and conventions lack an affirmation of the right to family unity and concrete steps to ensure that children can visit and travel with their families. For example, labour migration policies may not provide migrants with options to visit their families or care for their children. The lack of safe and legal pathways for migrant workers and their families also threatens children's rights to family unity, which in addition to securing essential support for children, has also been shown to have a positive impact on worker productivity.

Under the CRC and other sources of international law, children of migrant workers have the same right to live with their families as all other children, a right which should be applied indiscriminately.[76] Governments can protect the right to family unity by providing regular channels for migration that allow families to travel together and developing temporary work programmes that permit migrants to regularly return to their families or allow children to visit their migrating parents. States should increase regular channels for migrant workers to move

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72   Mirna Carranza, "The Cost of 'A Better Life': Children Left Behind - Beyond Ambiguous Loss."

73   John Bryant, "Children of International Migrants in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines: A review of evidence and policies," *Innocenti Working Paper No. 2005-05* (UNICEF, 2005).

74   "No left behind children," *No left behind children*, last accessed on 16 Jun 2023, https://noleftbehindchildren.com.

75   UNICEF, *Children 'Left Behind.'*

76   Ibid.

with their families and allow family visits during temporary work programmes. They should also strive to regularize the status of their migrant populations and improve working conditions through international or bilateral negotiations, as these are essential to promoting the rights of children in migrant households. They could also encourage the private sector to think creatively about family friendly work environments for all employees, including family visit time to allow workers to visit their family abroad. In addition, migrant sending countries should engage in dialogue with receiving countries to ensure bilateral agreements that allow migrant workers to take their children abroad.

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