

LEFT BEHIND CHILDREN MATTERS: COPING WITH THE 'RUPTURES OF MIGRATION' IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



Panel on visible and powerful – migrant voices in a connected world

International Metropolis Conference, Sydney, 29 Oct to 2 Nov 2018

Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Theodora Lam

MIGRATION REGIME IN ASIA: ONE OF PERMANENT TEMPORARINESS

- Premised on keeping migration temporary, and, apart from creating a privileged pathway for highly skilled migrants to gain residency and citizenship, most Asian receiving nation-states rule out “settlement, family reunification and long-term integration, including acquisition of citizenship, for less skilled migrants” (Asis and Battistella, 2013).
- Transience and transitoriness are becoming fundamental characteristics of labor migration flows worldwide, but these features resonate especially strongly in Asia, where particular migrant bodies are allowed to labour, but not allowed to stay.
- Permanent temporariness fostered by migration regimes in host societies which treat migrant workers as disposable labour governed through ‘revolving door’ policies rather than socio-political subjects with rights to family formation and integration.



TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AND CIRCUITS OF REMITTANCES AND CARE

- Families “go transnational” (i.e. split the reproductive and productive functions across nation-state boundaries) as a livelihood strategy leaving behind non-economically productive members in source communities.
- Labour migration often does not signal permanent departure or permanent settlement, but forms a part of circulating migration based on the formation of interactive transnational households linked by **to-and-fro movements of people and circuits of remittances, commodities, care and emotions.**



LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN: LEFT OUT IN ADULT-CENTRIC MIGRATION LITERATURE AND POLICY?

- With the increased volume of transnational contract-based labour migration, and particularly the feminisation of these mobilities in Southeast Asia, millions of children are growing up for part or all of their childhood years in the absence of a migrant father and/or migrant mother.
- Though children are often at the centre of migration processes (and indeed often the justification for parental migration), they have largely been overlooked in predominantly adult-centric migration literature and policy making.



GROWING UP IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND CHILDREN'S AGENCY

- Children are social actors who express agency in the social, economic and political context of distinctive childhoods
- Not passive but also not necessarily powerful (James and James, 2004)
- Have the capacity to act but also need to recognise their incapacity
- Children's actions have consequences



CHILD HEALTH AND MIGRANT PARENTS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA (CHAMPSEA) STUDY



- ❑ A mixed-method study investigating the impacts of parental migration on children's wellbeing in Southeast Asia.
- ❑ One key research question: How do Indonesian and Filipino left-behind children ages 9 to 12 understand, engage and react to the various disruptions in everyday life brought about by parental migration?
 - ❑ Understanding children's ...
 - ❑ agency, resilience and creativity in navigating migration matters;
 - ❑ role in migration decision-making process

“MEANINGS AND FEELINGS” OF MIGRATION FOR LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

Children’s Perception of the Main Reason Father/ Mother Migrated	Indonesia				Philippines				Total	
	Father’s		Mother’s		Father’s		Mother’s		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
For my/our education	36	42.4	56	44.8	99	60.0	41	56.9	232	51.9
General family care/ subsistence	36	42.4	30	24.0	45	27.3	18	25.0	129	28.9

*Other options, in descending order, are ‘Household Projects’; ‘No jobs/work here’; and ‘Other/Don’t Know’

Outward displays

We were crying at the airport. I said [to mother], that ‘take care always and we love you so much’. [I felt] very sad...I was very lonely’ (Magdalene, 9, Filipino, RMMOFC)

Unspoken emotions

[When father left], I was sad ... Just sad inside my heart. (Yuni, 10, Indonesian FMMC)

[Did I cry?] Almost ... [I didn’t actually want mother to go away] It broke my heart. (Nardi, 11, Indonesian MMFC)

INITIAL REACTIONS TO PARENTAL MIGRATION DECISIONS: “WHAT’S IT GOT TO DO WITH ME?”

Indonesian and Filipino children in this study have limited agency in the initial migration-decision making process.

- ▶ Parents themselves decide if and who should migrate.
- ▶ Livelihood concerns are more pressing over children’s views.
- ▶ Children informed personally or through other relatives.
- ▶ Young children did not understand fully what was happening.
- ▶ Children offered little resistance to their parent’s decision to migrate

WHEN PARENTS ACTUALLY LEAVE: GROWING ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

When reality hits

- ▶ Seeing parent leaving with their luggage
- ▶ Bidding farewell at the airport

Gradual adaptation and acceptance

- ▶ Talking to their left-behind carers or family members as well as long-distance communication with migrant parents to better understand the situation.

Resilience

- ▶ Draw on the accepted discourse that migration is a family livelihood strategy where the family works hard together so that children can succeed in life.
- ▶ Rhetoric of 'sacrifice'

I think I'm 9 years old or 10 [when she left]. My first reaction? They told me that my mother was going there for us...so we will have a nicer house, nicer life and even better studies. **I told them if it is really needed, it's ok for me...** I told them that...but **deep inside, I will feel so sad because having no mother is so difficult**, especially for someone like me who is going to be teenager soon. Because when you have a mom, sometimes when your dad is not around then he's working for the barangay, you have someone to accompany you here. And sometimes because there are things you can't tell your dad like when your love life in your school.

Kelvin, 12, Filipino, RMMFC

I still remember [when mother left]. But...she left to earn a living for me too. [I cried just now because] I was carried away with [missing my mother]. [When mother came back for holidays] I was glad. How will I explain it? I am happy because she has managed to make me happy. **She gave birth to me then she went to earn a living for me too** [starts sobbing].

Shirot, 12, Indonesian, MMFC

I was sad. Because when he was here, we were always together. He would bring us to church and hear Mass. The whole family would be together the whole day. [But] **It's okay because he is leaving for our sake.**

Candice, 11, Filipino, FCMC

GROWING SENSE OF RESISTANCE: “AREN’T YOU COMING HOME TO ME YET?”

Children grew less accepting of their family’s fractured living arrangement over time.

Assert their agency by employing either direct or indirect measures to persuade the migrant to return

Nagging their parent to return over telephone conversations

Come home! Grandfather is sick! (Jade, 11, Filipino, RMMFC)

Ibu, please come back soon...I feel alone at home. It’s not exciting without you. [The home is quiet without you] (Yuda, 11, Indonesian, RMMFC)

Yuda’s father affirmed, “Her [mother-migrant’s] contract was finished. [She did not renew because it was] our children who wanted her to go home.

GROWING SENSE OF RESISTANCE: “AREN’T YOU COMING HOME TO ME YET?”

Making their views clear to migrant parents’ employer

My daughter, is [always] scolding me... she tells to my employer, when will you send my mother home? [Employer] told me that... [My daughter] will tell them, ‘When will you let my mommy [come home]? My second employer told me that your daughter called up. They tell you to consider because they will need a mother. Because, since this contract, they don’t like me to go.

[The employers] want me to stay because I learned how to cook, and they eat my food. Even I finish my contract, they don’t arrange my papers.

So [my children], they send email [to my employer].

Amanda, 44, Filipino, RMMFC

CONCLUSION: ASSERTING LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN'S VOICES

Progress/change in agentic behaviour over migration life course

Initial migration decision: Fairly limited agency

Over time of separation: Growing understanding of family's fractured living arrangement; coming to terms with reasons for migration and the meaning of sacrifice

As time increases: Become less accepting of their parents' absence; Start asserting agency by employing different persuasion tactics

Simultaneously powerful yet powerless

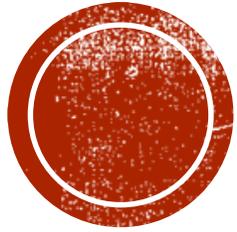
- Actively resist, rework or (re)formulate their own views and reactions
- Adults may or may not alter their plans according to children's wishes, or negotiate with them to reach a compromise

Bringing left-behind children into migration policy?

Left-behind children are not just an appendage of the migration story.

Their voices need to be given greater consideration in temporary migration schemes predicated on rupturing family life in order to sustain livelihood strategies.





THANK YOU!