

# REMITTANCES, TRANSNATIONAL PARENTING, AND THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND: ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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"You have it all. Good clothes. Good tennis shoes," . . .

"I'd trade it all for my mother . . . You can never get the love of a mother from someone else" (Nazario 2006:xii).

For this child, as for many others, family unity is more important than anything else even if it means living in poverty. One wonders if a child is capable of understanding the repercussions of a life spent in abject poverty, as children are inclined towards valuing emotional resources over economic ones. It becomes more difficult to justify being left behind in exchange for remittances given what is known about the profound impact the relationship with a primary caregiver has on one's life course. As we show, the choice between emotional and economic wellbeing becomes an impossible one.<sup>1</sup>

Remittance-led migration brings about traumatic separations of husbands and wives, children and parents, creating transnational households. Besides the suffering entailed, this separation and its accompanying sense of uncertainty have important consequences for the future wellbeing of the members of the transnational family. Remittances are proof of sacrifices and a serious commitment to the migrants' loved ones left behind (Tilly 2007). Yet, this paper addresses the following questions: what are the social and emotional costs incurred by separations between parents and children due to migration? To what degree are these costs compensated for by remittances and by care provided by others?

In order to assess these questions it is worth asking whether parental absence has an observable effect on the children left behind. Few studies have considered the children left behind and the impact that this experience has once the family reunites (Artico 2003; Bryant 2005; Dreby 2006; 2007; 2010; Heymann 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Menjívar 2000; Parreñas 2005). Despite the negative consequences of family separation after migration some researchers may shy away from writing much on these issues out of concern for being perceived as criminalizing or judging migrant parents. This is understandable but minimizing the potential psychological consequences tells only a partial story, and thwarts the prospects for the creation of policies to help these families.



With the recent tightening of border controls, sojourns often last longer than expected and children may go years without seeing their parents. Many times parents and children only know each other as voices on a telephone or through photographs. In her study of Mixtecs from Oaxaca working in Central New Jersey, Joanna Dreby (2006) looks closely at parenting trends inside transnational families. She reports an average length of mother-child separation of 3.4 years and an average length of father-child separation of 9.2 years for respondents in her sample (2006:28). Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2005) computed the time spent by parents with their children by dividing the length of stay abroad by the length of visits, reporting that in her sample in the Philippines, migrant mothers spent an average of 23.9 weeks with their children over the course of an average of 11.42 years, while migrant fathers spent 74 weeks with their children over 13.79 years (2005:32). Paradoxically, many women with children in the developing world migrate alone in large numbers to work as caretakers in developed areas. Given this reality, Jody Heymann (2006) wonders who is raising the children of the developing world? Migration scholars, development practitioners, and policy makers should consider this question.

The Catholic Church historically condemned emigration on moral grounds since it produced family separation (Fitzgerald 2009). Nonetheless, this paper should not be taken as a moral condemnation of parents who emigrate and send remittances to their children. As interviews with migrant parents show, they often see this as the ultimate sacrifice and evidence of parental love. However, unintended consequences arise from these decisions. This paper takes the narratives, subjective perceptions, and psychological effects on the children left behind as the issues under study. From the point of view of a young child, parental separation often cannot be understood consciously as something other than parental abandonment no matter what the expressed reasons or extenuating circumstances. The eventual consequences for these children will depend on the length and extent of the separation, their own narrative about the separation, resiliency, and the support networks in place.

## **Methods**

Our data offers new evidence on the long-term emotional consequences of migration and family separation on the children left behind. It includes clinical data from the therapeutic work of the second author, a psychotherapist who has worked since 2002 with immigrants and the children of immigrants<sup>2</sup> in New York City and in El Paso, Texas. This author has worked with over 60 members of transnational families divided by borders. This clinical evidence is contextualized by data gathered by the first author from in-depth interviews, surveys, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted with members of transnational families in the United States, Mexico, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, Switzerland, and France between 2003 and 2011 (Castañeda 2010).

**Figure 1. Children in Guerrero Mexico. Photo by Ernesto Castañeda  
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Sometimes the social distance between researchers and the actual remitters and receivers of remittances leads the researchers to overlook the social and psychological costs of remittances. To illustrate: one of the authors traveled to the southwest of Mexico in March of 2004 as part of a project to understand how remittances could be channeled to foster local economic development. A team of experts was charged with the task of teaching transnational households how to better manage the remittances they received. Upon arrival in Mexico, it was easy to see how much there was to learn about how remittances really work. The team found that, despite remittances, transnational households were using the money to cover basic needs, like paying monthly bills, and buying food; the small amounts left were used for occasional luxuries and for home construction (Smith, Castañeda, Franco, and Martino 2004). The towns visited had few working age men and women; since many parents had gone abroad to work, their children were left in the care of extended family. Once these left-behind children discovered that the research team came from New York City, they immediately asked the team for information and news about their parents; knowing only provincial life in their small town, these children assumed New York City was similarly a place where everyone must know each other.<sup>3</sup> These children had not seen their parents in years, and their interest in the team was a way to express their longing for their parents. These conversations showed how the team's enthusiasm to stimulate development through providing assistance in remittance-management made it difficult to consider the reality behind remittances: parentless children and communities without a local labor force (Castañeda 2006; Forthcoming-b).

### **Psychological Aspects of Family Separation**

With no other way to meet the family's needs besides migration, many parents and children are separated for years at a time. How does migration impact the family and its ability to meet their goals? To what degree can parents perform their parenting duties from afar? What are the impacts of child-parent separation? Can other caregivers be adequate substitutes for the migrant parents? These questions will be discussed in light of what is known about migration and the existing literature on the psychological impact of migration on migrants and their children.

The scene is a small bodega in New York in 2006. The cashier, young, probably a recent migrant, has a gentle smile, but something about her manner betrays the suffering she tries to forget. She eventually feels comfortable enough to disclose to one of the authors that she is indeed sad: her daughter is sick, and she cannot care for her. The cashier left her eight-month-old baby with her aunt back in Puebla, Mexico, when she came to New York City ten months ago; she has not seen her baby since. Now the child is sick and the doctors there cannot figure out what is wrong with her. The young woman confides that her baby is all she thinks about since she arrived in New York, and she hopes to go back soon to be with her. She reports losing weight and often being unable to sleep. Sick with worry about her baby, months later she is still seen at work in the same bodega, unable to return home to her child because she lacks papers.

Migrants are not only affected by political and social realities but also by psychological ones. For this reason scholars interested in how migration impacts the parent-child relationship and the children left behind are wise to turn to psychoanalysts León and Rebeca Grinberg who are among the first to present a sophisticated study of the adjustment process endured by migrants. The Grinbergs see some migrations as causing psychological trauma. They define trauma as "any violent shock and its consequences" (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989). Departure, prolonged separation from one's place of origin and loved ones, uncertainty about the conditions in the receiving country, and the risks and dangers associated with the actual migration journey all may be considered a shock to a migrant's psyche, with accompanying feelings of anxiety, depression, and mourning:

Migration is not an isolated traumatic experience that manifests itself at the moment of departure-separation from the place of origin, or that of arrival in the new, unfamiliar place where the individual will settle down. Migration would fall into the category of the so-called "cumulative" and "tension" traumas, with reactions not always spectacular, but with profound and lasting effects. The specific quality of reaction to the traumatic experience of migration is the feeling of helplessness . . . This risk is experienced more intensely if important situations of privation and separation have been suffered during childhood, resulting in experiences of anxiety and helplessness (Grinberg and Grinberg 1984).

Anyone who has interviewed economic migrants about their experiences is aware of the intense psychological pain that migration entails for them. Motivated to take desperate measures in an attempt to raise themselves and their families out of poverty, they realize they have an impossible choice – to remain in poverty or to leave their families in order to demonstrate how much they love and care for them. The families left behind, especially the children, also find themselves in a difficult situation – the children of migrants must adjust to the semi-permanent loss of a parent, and cope with the hole that is left in their lives while they continue to pass through the stages of physical, social and emotional development. How both parties negotiate this experience deserves the attention of migration scholars.

Migration is a crisis in the sense that it is an abrupt change in one's circumstances; crisis connotes a rupture, separation or uprooting (Kaes 1959 cited in Grinberg and Grinberg 1989). Because of the profound changes undergone, migrants are at heightened risk for depression, anxiety, psychosomatic illnesses, addictions and other problems that could affect their day-to-day functioning (Achotegui 2010). Grinberg and Grinberg (1989) propose a series of stages of psychological adjustment throughout the migratory process ending with the potential for a new sense of identity as a result of the migration. For Salman Akhtar migration itself threatens one's sense of identity (Akhtar 1995). It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of factors that determine whether a migrant will fall victim to these emotional consequences. The perception and meaning given to migration (i.e. sacrifice vs. abandonment) is critical in determining how the family manages the emotional consequences of the migration, either coping with or prolonging the trauma (Boss 2002).

Viewing migration as trauma does not mean that all migrants face paralyzing emotional pain. Like all traumas, an individual's response is highly dependent on character, maturity, life experience, past responses to traumas and the quality of parenting received. Migrants must cope with the new distance from loved ones, and overcome the trauma of migration, while simultaneously finding a job and a place to live, remitting, negotiating a strange language and culture, and parenting from afar. The traumas encountered by migrant parents may result in fewer emotional resources made available to parent their children from afar. While some may become competent providers of both material and emotional resources via teleparenting strategies (Smith, Castañeda, Franco, and Martino 2004), we argue that being a good parent from afar still cannot fully compensate for the physical absence of the parent.

### **Attachment theory**

Attachment theory postulates that humans have innate instincts to solicit care and protection, and contact from others. John Bowlby<sup>4</sup> writes,

Children who have parents who are sensitive and responsive are enabled to develop along a healthy pathway. Those who have



insensitive, unresponsive, neglectful, or rejecting parents are likely to develop along a deviant pathway which is in some degree incompatible with mental health and which renders them vulnerable to breakdown, should they meet with seriously adverse events. Even so, since the course of subsequent development is not fixed, changes in the way a child is treated can shift his pathway in either a more favourable direction or a less favourable one (Bowlby 1988:136).

Artico (2003) uses attachment theory as her framework to understand the experiences of the children left behind that she studied, and agrees with Bowlby that much psychopathology has its roots in intolerable separations and neglect in childhood: "Prolonged breaks in the mother-child relationship during the first three years of life appears to leave a characteristic impression on the child's personality. Clinically, such children appear withdrawn and isolated" (Bowlby 1973: 32 cited in Artico 2003:14). Artico (2003) further asserts that the link between attachment experiences and psychopathology is clear: "Suicide, depression, substance abuse, conduct disorder, and most of the personality disorders, for example, seem to relate to early negative experiences and separation from the attachment figure, specially when paired with the unavailability of an adequate substitute attachment" (Artico 2003: 15). Yet Falicov (2007) warns us against the elevation of the primacy of the mother-child relationship, since many cultures have traditionally used a tri-generational model of care or one of extended kinship care networks. We argue that even considering tri-generational, or alternative models of care, attachment theory holds up, and if one or more of the primary caretakers<sup>5</sup> leaves the child, this often will negatively affect children.

Children often feel as if somehow it is their fault that their parents left and may refuse to accept alternative explanations of the migration (Artico 2003; Grinberg and Grinberg 1989). Childhood experiences have a determining role in identity (Artico 2003). The child left behind will face feelings of abandonment, loss of identity, and loneliness. As Grinberg and Grinberg state, "The one who leaves dies, and so does the one who stays behind. The feelings of mourning with which each side responds to the separation may be compared to those one has at the death of the loved one" (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989). Children mourn for their lost parents, and also for the accompanying lost sense of themselves that is embodied in the parents and in their relationship with them but is not yet incorporated into the children as an independent part of their identity.

Interviewed children had no difficulty assessing a parent's migration as a traumatic event. The real focus of our inquiry is what effects migration has on the children left behind. To further explore this question, we use attachment theory which states that the relationships one has with one's primary caregivers influences one's character, and therefore the relations one has with others, and ultimately one's mental health (Bowlby 1988). Often certain kinds of psychopathology in adulthood can be traced back to



**Figure 2. Children in town of La Mixteca region of Guerrero. Photo by Ernesto Castañeda © 2005.**



specific patterns of attachment children had with their primary caregivers. The meaning derived from the replacement of the main caregiver with another may impact the child's later social functioning (Artico 2003).

### **The Children Left Behind**

A remittance economy, that is, a remittance-driven transnational circuit, creates the physical, social, and emotional division within its families. In migrant sending towns we see the phenomenon of teleparenting (Smith, Castañeda et al. 2004), or what Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) call "transnational motherhood." The question is whether parents can maintain their parenting role even from afar, when they wish to do so, and does the care and parenting received by the children left behind with alternative caregivers compensate for the loss of parenting by the parents themselves? If not, what are the social and emotional consequences of this?

The best way to assess the challenges of teleparenting is to include the testimonies of people who went through these experiences either as children, and/or parents. Dolores, a Mexican immigrant living in California, comments on the relations between her children and her husband whose teleparenting failed to meet the children's needs. Dolores states, "I thought that perhaps our daughters would never love him as a father because they only saw him during his brief visits" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:43). A young woman in her twenties said, "My father was like a stranger to my sisters and me. He left when I was two years old and returned when I was

**Figure 3. Grandparents who take care of seven grandchildren while their parents work in the United States. Photo by Ernesto Castañeda © 2006.**



seven – well, what kind of father is that? ... We grew up without him and we learned to decide ourselves, just with our mother” (Gonzalez de la Rocha 1989 cited and translated by Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:14). Children may not understand adult motives to emigrate. Given these accounts, we see how teleparenting is often not sufficient since the children can resent the absence of their emigrant parents even when they migrated with their children’s best interests in mind. At the same time, one often hears parents talk about the “ungratefulness of their children” and the loss of authority they experience when the family is reunited. Migration leaves both parents and children confused as result of disrupted family roles, and presents a threat to family cohesiveness.

When parents migrate their children’s care is often turned over to the extended family. Often they are competent substitute caregivers. However, our data indicates that the adults left at home caring for the young are often also engaged in the local work force. Grandparents, aunts and uncles may try to keep their small businesses afloat and enlist the children left behind to help out in the family restaurant or store. The scope of poverty that forces labor-age adults to migrate is so great that the caregivers left at home still must work when the remittances received are not enough.

Jody Heymann’s (2006) research exposes the stark choices many emigrant parents face. Her multisited fieldwork reveals that many working parents are either forced to leave children home alone, take older children out of school to care for the younger children, or take their children with them to the workplace. Children often raise each other, and infants



and toddlers are at risk of failing to receive an adequate social and emotional environment in which to develop. Heymann's work further shows how the pressures of poverty bring more and more family members into the workforce. Grandparents are increasingly less available for child care duties because they sometimes work outside the home for pay, leaving children somewhat neglected. Although this is not unique of children of emigrants, Heymann's research shows how the rise in employment across the household means that worldwide more than 340 million children under six reside in households in which all the adults work for pay (Heymann 2006).<sup>6</sup>

Children of migrant parents are often left with grandparents, aunts, uncles and/or godparents who they may come to regard as their "real" parents, especially if they have been raised by them most of their lives, and often call them "Mom" or "Dad." If the biological parents decide to reunite with their children, the children may suffer from the separation from those whom they consider to be their "real" parents since these extended family members fulfilled the parenting role and functions. Time will tell how these separations and reunifications may affect them in the long term. Some children in similar situations exhibit behavioral problems, school failure, phobias, complaints of physical pains and psychological regression (Artico 2003) as they struggle to cope with what their parents' migration represents for them (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989).

### **Giselle's Story**

Giselle, a 30-year old Guatemalan woman who has lived in New York City since she was 16 years old, enters the therapist's office with a stoic expression on her face. Giselle speaks English with hardly a trace of an "accent," holds a Bachelor's Degree, works in a professional field, and owns a car and a condominium. She has two young daughters. Giselle says that she is seeking therapy because she and her husband no longer get along. She feels he is not there for her and that they do not communicate. Her husband, also an immigrant, works overtime and spends much of his spare time with his own relatives, leaving parenting entirely to Giselle. As she talks, it emerges that her most significant relationship is actually with her mother, and the problems with her husband are impacted by the fact that he and her mother do not get along.

Giselle is the oldest of four children. She was raised by her mother and her grandparents in a one-room shack in a small, poor village in Guatemala. "At least there was tourism since we were close to the Mexican border," she says. When she was 6 years old, her mother Fidela left the family to work in New York. Fidela had no friends or family members there, no contacts. Giselle's family waited for word from her and none came. "We didn't know where she was, if she was dead or alive. It was terrible. I thought I would never see her again," Giselle's eyes widen as she recalls how the family waited a year before finally receiving a phone call from Fidela to tell she had made it to New York.

Giselle recounted how the family's poverty, even with her mother's remittances, was a constant burden. Giselle stated that she never had toys, never played. She went straight home after school in order to help her grandparents by working in their family restaurant, or by selling sodas on the streets to tourists for extra change. Her grandparents never attended her school activities; no one asked about her homework. Giselle said, "I became a second mother to my three younger siblings but I had no one to take care of me." Giselle got used to putting others' needs ahead of her own and playing the role of the adult. Giselle and her siblings migrated legally to New York City when Giselle was 16 to join her mother. Once there she had to help her mother escape the abusive marriage she had entered into in order to obtain legal residency.

Her mother cannot read or write, or speak English, and Giselle remains her advocate and companion. She talks about helping her mother in the way a parent would talk about helping a dependent child. Her siblings also go to Giselle for help and still view her as their *de facto* mother and, according to Giselle, see Fidela as a failed mother. Giselle often complains that her younger siblings do not appreciate all that her mother did for them.

Once in New York City, Giselle studied hard and learned English. Giselle has managed to ascend to a socio-economic level that she knows she could never have obtained if she had stayed in her country. She is grateful her life turned out this way, she says. "I am glad my mother came to the U.S. She did the right thing, there was nothing for us there." Yet her subjective emotional experience was that no one else provided the care that her mother was unable to provide from afar—in other words, she experienced profound neglect and abandonment, both by her mother and by her substitute caregivers. This left psychological scars; Giselle struggles with depression and anxiety. The poor attachment patterns Giselle experienced with her early caregivers have reappeared in her marriage. She feels her husband does not care about her and that she has to rely on herself for everything. Her early experiences of separation from her primary caregiver have made it very difficult for her to learn new and different ways of relating to others.

Giselle's case cannot be taken as universal. Not all grandparents left the children in their care with the feeling that no one was there for them. Besides, Giselle's story does not have a tragic ending. Giselle is a productive member of her community, works, speaks two languages and is a mother herself. Yet she suffers from feelings of abandonment, depression and emptiness. She reports her depression worsened following the births of both of her children (a time that certainly evokes feelings about one's sense of attachment to one's primary caregivers). She appears unable to form a fulfilling connection to her partner.

Although we do not know what Fidela's experience of leaving Giselle and her three siblings behind was like for her, we can speculate that this was a time of intense stress for her too. Arriving in a city where she knew no

one and did not speak the language, she was unable to contact her family for a year. She entered into an abusive marriage in order to gain residency and bring over her children. How might these stresses have affected her ability to parent Giselle and her siblings from afar? To what degree can Giselle's suffering be attributed to the psychological scars of her mother's migration in her early life, and her subsequent migration as an adolescent? As Giselle's case illustrates, studies show a positive correlation between disruption of attachment in early childhood and a propensity to develop conflictual and unsatisfying interpersonal relations in adulthood (Hazan and Shaver 1987,1990; Kobak and Hazan 1991; Shaver and Brennan 1992 as cited in Artico 2003).

Migration can signify a crisis for the family (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989). How detrimental it is for the family depends on the how the family adapts and recovers (Boss 2002). In Giselle's case, she is able to talk about the pain of being a child left behind. At the same time, she feels that her mother did the "right" thing to migrate. Giselle realizes that the gains she has achieved in her life were only possible because her family migrated. Furthermore, transnational families often prove to be flexible and resilient and, although different from the nuclear family model, transnational families are not necessarily detrimental to society but are instead a response to a particular situation. In some households grandparents perform successful parenting roles. Emerging psychological research on child development points towards the important role of grandparents in building resilience in children, especially when working in a cooperative way with the biological parents (Artico 2003; Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002). The success of these transnational family models appears to depend on context and on specific factors in any given family, such as the quality of responsiveness of substitute caregivers, the quality of the previous relationships between parents and children, the ability to maintain social and emotional ties with migrating parents, and the overall support available in the community. When the family reunites on either side of the border after years of separation, the emotional bonds may be successfully repaired given adequate circumstances and emotional attunement (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002). We must beware of criticizing non-traditional family configurations; however, researchers and policy makers should also be careful not to romanticize or exaggerate the resilience or the emancipating and developmental potential of transnational families.

### **Migration as a Household Survival Strategy**

Migration resulting from economic desperation can be seen as an example of personal resolve and determination. This is especially the case for migrant "pioneers" – those who are the first ones to emigrate. Nonetheless, the decision to migrate most often happens as a household strategy within a conducive social context that may include a trans-local community (Cohen 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey, Alarcon, Durand, and González 1987; Parreñas 2005; Sayad 2004). Douglas Massey et al. point

out in their cumulative causation of migration theory, “once the number of network connections reaches a critical threshold, migration becomes self-perpetuating because each act of movement creates the social structure necessary to sustain it” (Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994). After the practice of migrating diffuses via social networks and chain migration (Tilly 2005; 2007; Tilly and Brown 1967), it becomes institutionalized as an available household strategy for economic survival. The birth of a child, financial emergencies, and sickness may lead a household to consider migration as a way to obtain needed capital.

Among the Kabyles of Algeria, the pressure to provide for one’s family and the lack of alternative ways to increase household income have created a social context where migration is no longer seen as optional, rather it has become supported and embedded in the social institutions of the milieu (Mahé 2006; Sayad 2004). In towns with an emigration tradition, the social context makes the decision easier, almost natural. Chain migration e.g. from the Mixtec Mountains of Guerrero, Puebla and Oaxaca to the United States, has made remittances a common household strategy to increase family income. A large inflow of remittances to a locality also implies that family separation has become widespread.

### **Remittances: Social Aspects**

Remittances usually refer to the money and resources that migrants send to their place of origin. Yet remittances are also an indicator of the strength and extent of the social relations between the migrants and the family members left behind. Emigrants leave their family behind geographically but not emotionally, and most of them keep their commitments to their family. Remittances represent the sweat and tears that migrants endure in order to provide their families with even a humble improvement in their living standards (Castañeda 2009).

Remittances are not only important economically but they are also a means to express care for the recipients in a way that makes kinship, friendship and other social ties transparent. Social relations and categorical memberships precede remittances (Zelizer and Tilly 2006). Remittances reinforce previous social ties and commitments, which maintain trust networks and emotional bonds across distances (Tilly 2007:5).

For Federico Besserer, remittances are “a product of love” (cited in Gil Martínez de Escobar 2006), and Bianet Castellanos states,

Understanding migrant remittance practices has become a critical area of study for migration scholars. By focusing primarily on economic transfers, however, these studies overlook migrants’ non-monetary contributions . . . [e.g.] the role the emotive plays in the formation and maintenance of migrant communities. The act of migrating involves sentiments. Fear, love, anger, pain, and isolation are evoked throughout the processes of departure, settlement, and return. What role do these sentiments play in social relationships

that exist across an expanded space? It is these sentiments that help imagine community or the lack thereof that weaken social relationships across space (Castellanos 2007b).

As Castellanos implies, emotional ties are the byproduct of strong and meaningful social relations. Frequent physical contact, the expression of love, caring and providing for are key elements to fulfill one's role as a parent or spouse. Thus distance becomes an issue in close social relations, especially in asymmetric and dependent ones, such as between parents and children.

For migrants to remit is to be a good family member. As we learned while interviewing migrants, answering the question of whether the person sends remittances in the affirmative is the socially desired response since migrants could be labeled as "bad" parents or ungrateful children for not remitting. Migrants know it is their responsibility to remit. When the economic situation does not allow them to do so, many may prefer to completely cut communication and ties with their families rather than return home empty handed and humiliated. Moral boundaries are drawn between those who remit and those who do not (Tilly 2007).

To remit means to stay attached to family and community; in this way migrants can expect loyalty and continued membership in their families and communities of origin. Remittances are crucial in maintaining moral commitments to the family but they also contribute to economic inequalities between households receiving remittances and those who do not, to the point that family members in non-transnational households may feel a social and moral pressure to emigrate themselves (Sayad 2004). As Jason DeParle (DeParle) writes, "The good provider is the one that leaves," the social pressure exercised on individuals living in traditional emigrant sending communities to emigrate is enormous. Not migrating is seen as a parental failure to provide economically for one's children to the best of one's abilities. Parents contemplating migration often overlook the important psychological and emotional ordeal of the children left behind. For example, Carola Suárez-Orozco et al. (2002) show that the children left behind have increased incidence of depressive symptoms. The tension is that while remitting parents see themselves as providing economic resources, children value their parents' emotional resources even more. Children tend to dismiss the economic support, emotional pain, and sacrifices migrant parents make for their benefit partly since an important part of a parents' role is to provide emotional comfort. Given these competing claims many potential migrants seem doomed from the outset – bad if they leave, and bad if they stay.

### **A Transnational Family: the Case of Asunción and Casimiro**

Although [migrants] see their immediate destination as a place to earn a better wage, they may still view their home country as a



better place in which to raise their children or eventually retire. In this regard, remitters and their families are forging a new kind of family—the transnational family—living in and contributing to two cultures, two countries, and two economies at the same time (Terry and Wilson 2005)

Asunción and Casimiro married in Guerrero. As they had children, they could not find enough work to meet their growing expenses. Cousins convinced Casimiro to go to Long Island, New York. There he lived in a small apartment with a cousin and six other men from the same town. Through their contacts, he quickly found a job in a restaurant where he worked ten-hour shifts, six days a week. He dutifully sent \$300 dollars a month to support his wife, children, and mother in Mexico. The remittances were used to pay for food, utilities, transportation, and the mandatory school uniforms and materials for his children, leaving little for other purposes (ethno-surveys 2004).

Casimiro and his family talked once a week via the public telephone booth in the town's plaza. The children always asked when he would return. The answer Casimiro always gave was "*Pronto mi'jo*" meaning "soon, my son." Casimiro always had the intention of going back to Mexico "soon" to join his family after saving some money but expenses in the U.S. were much higher than he had imagined and he could never seem to save as much as he had hoped to when he left Guerrero. In this way, two years in the U.S. quickly turned into four.

Meanwhile in Mexico, the much needed repairs to the family's house proved expensive and took a long time; on top of this, the remittances from Casimiro were not enough to start a business. Therefore, the family decided it would be good for Asunción to move to New York, too, in order to increase the family's remittances. The oldest daughter, then fifteen, would also come so that they could "keep an eye on her."<sup>7</sup> Asunción and Casimiro's five younger children would stay home with their grandmother, who would now receive the remittances herself and take care of the children's needs. This arrangement was not seen as an economic exchange but as familial co-responsibility and solidarity, a common social practice that is part of family survival strategies.

The family saved for some months in order to have enough money to pay the local *coyote* (smuggler) to bring Asunción and her daughter to the U.S. After a long trip to the border and being deported a couple of times, Asunción and her daughter finally arrived in Long Island. The three moved into a new apartment but this meant that Casimiro now had to pay four times more for rent. After some months, their daughter enrolled in school and Asunción began working, which increased the family income but the expenses for food, utilities and other necessities in the U.S. also increased. In the end, the family left behind continued to receive the same amount as before, \$300 dollars a month.

After some time, Asunción became pregnant and towards the end of the pregnancy she stopped working, thus ending her financial contribution to the household. Asunción and Casimiro decided that it would be best for Asunción and her daughter to go back to Mexico, because life was cheaper there, and in this way her mother-in-law could take care of Asunción through the last months of her pregnancy. They used much of their savings to pay for two one-way airplane tickets back to Mexico.

Family embedded migration is what produces significant and steady remittance flows. In order to assess the prospects that remittances have for development, we must first understand where remittances come from, and what they represent beyond financial flows and aggregate amounts at the national level. As the case of Casimiro's family illustrates, having a spouse and minor dependents back home makes it harder to plan a permanent life not only in the United States but also in Mexico since the need to earn remittances both separates families temporarily and increases uncertainty, making them feel as if they are living in limbo. Furthermore, two households now need to be supported which significantly decreases potential savings and potential upward mobility.

Remittance-driven migration put families and communities in limbo by creating "suspended communities" where everything is on hold, waiting for the moment the migrant returns, or for the family or younger household members to follow. An innate instability accompanies transnational households since they may end up on either side of the border depending on economic and political conditions beyond the control of the household. Similar family stories can end with family reunification, the disintegration of the family, or in a few cases even the death of a member of the family due to sickness, job accidents in the United States or while crossing the border.

Asunción and Casimiro's case illustrates the severity of the risks incurred from migrating. In fact, Casimiro ended up being run over and killed on Long Island in 2004. As a result, his mother, wife, and children not only lost their main breadwinner but they also lost the family's male authority figure, which put his children at further risk for poverty and sexual abuse. Follow-up interviews with this family confirmed their worst fears; soon after Casimiro's death, his adolescent daughter was gang-raped. The sadness and stress associated with this event made her mother lose the baby she was expecting. Despite all this, Asunción was unable to get a visa to attend the ensuing court trial in the United States against the man who allegedly deliberately ran over Casimiro as many eyewitnesses attested. In the end Asunción's family had to leave Guerrero because of the shame resulting from these cumulative tragedies and traumas and their economic and social prospects remain dire. In this case, the family's migratory experiences and decisions initially appear similar to many migratory experiences of other transnational families; however, their outcomes had enormous unintended psychological and social consequences that the family could not have anticipated.

### **Reproduction of Migration Patterns across Generations**

All of Casimiro's family ended up leaving their town, and the oldest daughter later migrated to the U.S. Family trajectories have a direct effect on economic development, and they reproduce the social conditions that are conducive to further migration. The migration of a family member creates changes inside family dynamics and may incur high emotional tolls on both parents and children; yet on the financial side, once migration and remittances create a transnational household economy, it is hard to stop sending and receiving remittances. We could say that remittances create a certain dependency on foreign currencies. In the cases when the pioneer family migrant has to return because of deportation, sickness, or retirement, often a new family member must take the place of the remitter. Sarah Mahler explains this point clearly:

Increasingly visible are older returning migrants, generally men in their forties to sixties who fled El Salvador during the war, leaving behind their spouses and young children. With limited education and skills for advancing economically on Long Island, many of these men desired to return home—indeed their families begged them to return—but the families had also grown too dependent upon remittance income to forsake migration altogether. So, before returning, migrants first sponsor the migration of at least one child, grooming him or her in the basics of migrant life—housing and job. The children ensure that remittances will continue to flow homeward, cash that even highly self-sufficient farmers need to purchase fertilizers and pay for clothing, medical care, and so on (Mahler, 2001a:120–121 cited in Tilly 2007:12).

Once the household economy becomes transnational, it is hard to revert back despite all the emotional costs, risks and drawbacks. Migrant sending towns are left with long-term absences of working age people, and then often need to attract internal migrants to perform certain jobs (Fitzgerald 2009).

### **Migration by Unaccompanied Minors**

As the migration experience spreads in a town, the migration stream becomes more diverse in terms of age and socioeconomic origin. Women, children and the elderly eventually make the journey north to join their family members (Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994), to the point where yearly more than 10,000 Mexican children traveling alone are captured by U.S. authorities and sent to shelters along the Mexican border (UNICEF/DIF 2004). Many of these children aim to find their parents and may even begin their journey without the consent of their family (Nazario 2006). According to the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations, Mexican consulates in the U.S. have helped more than 87,757 unaccompanied minors since 1994. In 2003 alone, 5,457 children were repatriated. Between

1998 and 2003, 42,342 children were housed in shelters along the border run by private groups such as the YMCA, Mexican NGOs, youth-aid centers like the “*Centros de Integración Juvenil*”, and the Mexican agency in charge of family wellbeing (UNICEF/DIF 2004). An estimated 48,000 unaccompanied minors from Mexico and Central America entered the U.S. in 2001, 75 per cent of them reportedly searching for their mothers (Nazario 2006).

Cecilia Menjívar (2000) and Sonia Nazario (2006) show how the experiences of Central American children can be especially hard since in order to get to the United States they must first cross Mexico without papers and with few resources, facing many risks. Nazario (2006) tells the story of a Honduran boy, Enrique, who risked his life by riding on top of freight trains from Honduras to the U.S., crossing Guatemala and Mexico, facing gangs, criminals, police abuse, immigration agents, hunger, etc. As the movies “*Al otro Lado*” (Loza 2005), “*Sangre de mi Sangre*” (Zalla 2007), “*Sin Nombre*” (Fukunaga 2009) or “*La Misma Luna*” (Riggen 2008) illustrate, sometimes the children’s longing for their parents is so strong that they will risk their lives in order to reunite with their parents even if it means running away and traveling alone down unknown routes. In Morocco, we often found many children in the streets fending for themselves. They could not wait to go to Europe to reunite with their parents; we heard of many stories of children hiding under trucks in places like Tangiers in order to enter boats and containers headed for Europe. Many die in the attempt.

Sometimes parents migrating within a country bring their children with them to work in the fields or factories for low wages. Some indigenous parents prefer to leave their kids in commercial towns to beg, fend for themselves or, in the case of Mexico, go into shelters for Migrant Indigenous Children supported by the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (González Román 2004). These shelters provide food and a place to sleep as well as bilingual education (Spanish and indigenous languages) but the sanitation conditions are terrible and the budget per child per day is less than ten cents (Interview with Ortencia Ayala Díaz. Guerrero, August 2005).

## Changing Family Roles

In the absence of their husbands, women’s routines and responsibilities expanded. Studies conducted in Mexico confirm that in these circumstances women assume new tasks previously performed primarily by men, such as administering resources, making decisions about children’s education and disciplining youth, doing work associated with the care of agriculture and livestock, and participating in other income-earning activities (Ahern et al. 1985, Alarcon 1998, Gonzalez de la Rocha 1989, Mummert 1998, 1991 cited in Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:62).



**Figure 4.** As seen in the photo, children often take on parenting for younger siblings. Photo by Ernesto Castañeda © 2005.



Migration shakes up the family social structure. Paternal absence implies changes in gender roles since those left behind make up for the unpaid housework and decision-making that the missing parent(s) would have done otherwise. This includes older siblings acting as substitute parents as shown in the picture below of girls whose parents are abroad.

Remittances as a financial household strategy have implications that expand far beyond the realm of the economic to affect social roles and emotional processes such as identity and gender formation. In many communities within Mexico, Algeria, and Morocco migration has become a rite of passage where a commonly held belief is that “real men” migrate (Sayad 2004; Smith 2006). For example, remitting fathers affect the model of masculinity that the remittance receiving sons will tend to reproduce. The children of migrants also tend to migrate when they grow up since “*Se les ha metido la idea de Nueva York. Piensan que el dinero es la vida pero descuidan lo familiar, la unidad familiar*” (“They get the idea of New York. They think money is all and they neglect family life, family unity”) . . . Fathers turn into nominal fathers, “*padres de cheque, no más*” or fathers only by check/remittances (interview with Priest, Guerrero, summer 2005). From care providers and heads of households, fathers pass to being remitters only, long distance breadwinners. This may have negative repercussions for the mental health of the migrant fathers (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002).

While the migrant father’s main role is to act as a breadwinner by remitting, more emotional labor is often expected from the mother even when she remits (Dreby 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas



**Figure 5. Where have all the parents gone? Women and children left behind in Guerrero, Mexico. Photo by Ernesto Castañeda © 2006.**



2005). Gender roles sometimes change while other times they are further reinforced by migration. As in the case of Asunción, sometimes wives follow their migrating husbands but it is important to note that in many cases women are key agents in promoting their own migration, that of their husbands, and that of the whole family (see examples in Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Menjívar 2000; Parreñas 2005; Dreby 2006:18; Smith 2006).

Desperate parents who migrate in order to send remittances may think that money can solve all problems. The disappearance of the parent may sometimes have repercussions for school attainment and social functioning (Artico 2003), cause increased marital infidelity and HIV rates, (Hirsch, Higgins, Bentley, and Nathanso 2002), intra-family violence, and family abandonment. All have been directly observed and documented by local officials, and self-appointed moral guardians, commonly teachers and priests. In Guerrero, teachers point to certain, although non-universal, correlations between parental migration and child misbehavior. Priests talk about the correlation between the upsurge of infidelity inside transnational households and resulting violent acts of revenge, and about how the high emigration levels of men results in the growing power of youth gangs in the town (Interviews with priests, schoolteachers and local government officials Guerrero, Mexico 2005).

## **Caveats and Considerations against the Denunciation of Transnational Families**

Despite the negative side-effects discussed, one must not exaggerate these deleterious effects and subscribe to an altogether dismal view of transnational family life (Parreñas 2005), that over-romanticizes ideal-typical nuclear families (Falicov 2007). As Judith Stacey (1990) points out, new kinds of families do not necessarily threaten the social fabric but may instead represent the diverse forms that the family can take depending on specific social contexts. Transnational families may represent an extreme example of the separation of family-work and outside-work (Stacey 1990) that began long ago with the industrial revolution, and need not necessarily be viewed in a pejorative manner.

The nuclear family model is often an ideal-typical conception that cannot be applied across different cultures. For example, in Latin America it is not rare for grandmothers, or the oldest daughter, to take care of children in large families even in non-transnational contexts (Gill 1994 cited in Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997:557). Spatially and temporarily separated families are not without historical precedents; they were common among Chinese, Polish, Jewish and Italian immigrants to the U.S. (Foner 2000; Nakano Glenn 1983; Thomas and Znaniecki 1927 cited in Dreby 2006:3). As Parreñas (2005:162) mentions, illiberal regimes in Asia and the Persian Gulf region have guest-worker programs that encourage family separation. The same happens in 'liberal' regimes, for example, the "Bracero Program" (1942-1964) between the U.S. and Mexico mandated divided families, since it provided men with temporary visas for agricultural work without any provisions for family unity (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; 1997; Dreby 2006:3). Nonetheless, by having visas, temporal workers could live with their families for a number of months each year, avoiding prolonged family separations. In the case of internal migration, e.g. Mayans working in Cancun, remittances can represent an economic advancement without taking a complete toll on social relations and parenting because of the ease of travel and visits at least during weekends (Castellanos 2007a). Yet the effects of these short distance migrations cannot be generalized to international migration, especially not for undocumented workers.

As Falicov (2007) insists, collectivist caregiving practices are neither new, nor worrisome. Our position is not to denounce collectivist or tri-generational models of caregiving; rather, our contention is that parental migration during childhood is a traumatic event that has been overlooked in the literature and in clinical settings.

### **Costs of Family Separation: Impact on Parent-child Relations**

As Nazario (2006) chronicles, after many attempts and long months, Enrique finally joined his mother in North Carolina. Nevertheless, once reunited, they would often fight. Enrique was full of rage and resentment at his mother's departure and refused to obey his mother since he

insisted that it was his grandmother who raised him and thus she was the only one who could reprimand him. His mother would often respond that she sent money to him and thus he owed her gratitude, credit, love, and respect. Ceres Artico found similar results in the pairs of migrant parent-adolescents she interviewed (Artico 2003). From the child's point of view, migration often transforms parents into relatively good providers of economic resources but relatively bad providers of emotional resources.

Parental migration needs to be understood as a crisis in the lives of children. The separation following migration is likely to forever alter the nature of the child-parent relationship; this relationship may be repaired and restored but many children of migrants report feeling a void that cannot be forgotten (Artico 2003). When a family member migrates, there is no dated return ticket; the migrant may plan on returning, yet this event is never fixed; it remains always floating in the minds of the migrant and the family. Those left behind have memories of the one who departed and hope for their return. Much like a soldier at war, the family must adjust to the ambiguity of having one of their own away, not knowing when, or if, that person will return. Pauline Boss (2002) has called this concept *ambiguous loss*; it refers to the uncertainty involved in being separated from a family member for an indefinite period of time. Are they still part of the family even when they no longer share everyday family life? Will the family members return, and if so, will they be the same? Ambiguity about the family boundary, that is, who is in and out of the family, is associated with a high level of family stress, and this stress can hold the family in psychological limbo. No matter to whom the child's primary attachment is, loss (be it physical or psychological) of that figure can have negative outcomes for children (Boss 2002).

## Conclusion

The emotional consequences of family separation have implications for immigrant integration at the receiving society and for the economic development at the place of origin. Many concentrate on the economic aspects of remittances, disregarding the subjective perspective and the meaning-making aspects of the migration experience and the economic consequences derived from this. Viviana Zelizer is one of the few scholars to have successfully analyzed the interplay between emotions and socio-economic factors (Zelizer 1985; Zelizer 2005). She argues that emotions affect "economic decisions" and that "economic decisions" affect emotional states. In the case of transnational household economies it is not just that emotions are embedded in remittances, but there is a dialectical relationship between the economic logic of migration to provide for the family, and the emotional logic of remitting as a moral duty and an act of love – ironically overlooking the economic and emotional costs that this decision will have. Thus we argue that the suffering that the children left behind feel is an intrinsic part of the logic of remittance-economies. Sometimes families "pay" for remittances with the psychological traumas



engendered by migration and family separation (Grinberg and Grinberg 1984).

Migration leaves children vulnerable and “parentless” without physical, psychological or emotional protection although with the possibility of greater financial protection through remittances. Some commentators believe that money can compensate for the hardships experienced by family separation (World Bank 2006:63). While the household’s economic resources may increase with remittances, the debate on development has rarely concentrated on the family’s overall wellbeing, especially concerning the social and psychological needs of those left behind (Castañeda Forthcoming-a). This is important for further research since in order to create economic development it is necessary that the children who receive remittances experience upward social mobility and at least maintain a certain level of psychological “wellness”.

Transnational families keep many facets of social life suspended, waiting for reunification on either side of the border. These communities face a spatial and temporal split that creates uncertain and novel relations between members who are home and those who are abroad. Members of these communities put their hopes abroad but they stay attached to local institutions and identities (Castañeda Forthcoming-b). They continue to make emotional investments, which are as powerful and as important as economic investments and become important considerations for migrants when making decisions. This transnational orientation could be seen as a success in the home community but it often comes at the cost of marginality and exploitation in another community.

Migrants, especially those without papers, are never sure how long they can stay abroad, or if there is an economic future back home. The transnational family is in limbo, living in a state of fear and anxiety that causes malaise and emotional stress far away from the support of the extended family and community of origin. The ambiguity of the situation privileges strategies of adaptation that distribute risks and spread connections in both societies, further reinforcing the uncertainty. Many families considering migration cannot adequately maintain a single household; these same families often find that following migration they are even less able to maintain two households and thus find themselves in an even more vulnerable situation, despite the short term gains that remittances afford. Families’ futures remain contingent on chance events and structural forces at work.

The long-term effects of the transnational family configurations are unclear. Further research should explore the questions raised in this paper. What is clear is that changes in family structure, which are not spelled out in economic development theory, have important effects that transcend household walls. A peasant household left without any labor will not be able to work the land. Despite new capital, a family workshop without apprentices can hardly grow; in this way, communities without an adult labor force cannot develop and children without parents struggle to

become successful members of society. The long-term consequences of these new family configurations have to be considered, since they will bring about different socio-economic arrangements that will have an important impact on future economic development of both the sending and receiving communities and nations at large.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2006 meeting of the American Sociological Association in Philadelphia, the 2007 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in Montréal, Canada; and at the workshop “Transnational Parenthood and Children Left Behind” at PRIO Oslo, Norway in 2008. We thank Charles Tilly, Gil Eyal, and Robert C. Smith for all their help with the larger project of which this paper is a part of. For their comments on earlier drafts we thank Joanna Dreby, Leslie Martino, Cecilia Menjívar, Elzbieta Gozdzia, and Marisa Ensor. Josué Lachica, Anthony Jiménez, Ana Morales, Angelique Nevarez-Maes, Guillermina Gina Núñez-Mchiri and specially Richard Dugan helped with editing. We also thank Gregory Weeks, John R. Weeks, and anonymous reviewers for helpful editorial suggestions. Much of the fieldwork in Guerrero was conducted along with Leslie Martino who provided many of the introductions to transnational families. Special thanks to the people who shared their stories with us. All errors remain our own. Please direct correspondence to Ernesto Castañeda. Department of Sociology and Anthropology. University of Texas, El Paso, 500 West University Ave., Old Main Building, 307, El Paso, Texas 79968 or [ecastaneda10@utep.edu](mailto:ecastaneda10@utep.edu)

<sup>2</sup> To secure the anonymity of the interviewees and to protect this vulnerable population, no permanent records of the migrants or their families have been kept and all names provided are aliases.

<sup>3</sup> This is actually the case for the translocal social field where *paisanos* live close to each other at the place of destination and may often be in touch, resulting in gossip and news from one’s hometown spreading quickly. And indeed one of the team members knew some of the parents of the children we encountered through being in contact with this transnational network.

<sup>4</sup> John Bowlby, the initial proponent of attachment theory, was a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who studied child development during World War II, a time of increased separation of children from their parents during, for example, the evacuation of children from London to keep them safe from air raids (Kindertransport), and the use of group nurseries to allow mothers of young children to contribute to the war effort.

<sup>5</sup> It is believed that the child may recognize two or three primary caregivers (Main 1993).

<sup>6</sup> There are certain similarities to the case of wealthy professionals who spend most of their time at work, and thus outsource childcare to nannies. Yet in this case the working parents cohabit with their children and are thus significantly more present than those in transnational families.





<sup>7</sup> The reasoning went that as older family members, especially male ones, leave the community, the vulnerability of the remaining family members' increases and it may lead to exploitation and even sexual abuse. This also applies to the Maghreb.

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