

Left Behind

The impact of economic migration of
Children Left Behind and their families

Hotel Leopold - European Parliament

2 March 2011



Flavia Piperno- CeSPI

*The impact of care drain on
families and welfare states in the
countries of origin*

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At the origin of the issue: care drain and 'transnational families'

Migration always entails a fracture and re-framing of family's relationships. However the departure of men has generally be conceived as part of their traditional role as breadwinner.

The feminization of migration

Policy makers and researchers started to talk about care drain and transnational family only in relation to the growing feminization of migration (growing demand in Western labour markets; relaxation of visa entry requirements in eastern European countries; female migratory networks).



As they are the main caregivers in the families of origin, their departure had a strong impact on the social cohesion within families and communities back home

Risk of women stigmatization

The departure of women – due to the strong social impact that produces – is often associated to a rhetoric concerning the risk of women/children exploitation/trafficking or 'de facto abandon'.



Compensatory strategies which limit the impact of care drain.

Mothers: emotional care and guidance from afar: frequent trips back home, telephone calls, remittance flows.

In loco: care is reorganised through the expansion of the traditional role of the extended family, resort to new forms of informal exchange within the friends and neighbours' network, and acquisition of new care services on the private market.

Minors left behind: elements of pride

According to most of minors interviewed, the departure of their parents seems to fit into a process of overall improvement in their lives including personal growth, an increase in socio-economic opportunities and the possibility of travelling overseas (thus acquiring new social capital and language skills).

Michaela (Focsani): “ My mother left for my best, for raising me up, for helping me to have a good education and find a job”

Valerio (Focsani): “When weighing up events I see a positive outcome: first of all responsibility, which is a very important thing”

Care shortage: difficult re-organization of care

- Generation gap between grandparents and grandchildren may be too great, above all if minors have to move from the city to the country, where the difference in mentality can prove to be insurmountable.
- Care takers might experience difficulty in providing effective care and supervision and care arrangements often prove to be “short-term” : different accommodations, different cities as care takers cannot keep the child with them for long. Internal migration which stems from the care need.
- Forced proximity of family members or neighbours might not give rise to close relationships, leaving young people feeling halfway between “guests” and family members.

'Emotional welfare' Shortage

- When we asked young people who supported them in times of difficulty, they were not able to point to any adult they could turn to apart from their mothers abroad.

Sefora (Rome): *“My neighbours care for the practical arrangements but who takes care of the heart of my children”?*

- Managing good communication from afar is often difficult. Children: repetitive telephone calls; mothers physically too remote and dealing with their own pain and suffering; Mothers: loss of normative power; emotional distance that lasts also after family reunion.

Factors making care drain worst:



The impact of care drain has a stronger negative impact if: children belong to a less-protected family situation (many migrant women divorced or widowed); when children experience difficult or transitional period; when minors have more fragile personalities; if problematic social circumstances occur (i.e. Where bullying and child deviance is more engrained).

The impact on local welfare states

The drain of 'informal care' from families means an increased demand of 'formal care' addressed to the local welfare systems.

-2005: 17% of Romanian minors left behind benefited from some public social services assistance programme or was on the waiting list (source: ANPC)

-2005: Increasing pressure on health structures by left behind elders in all Est European Countries (source: WB)

- community-level mobilisation on the part of local social services, churches, schools and NGOs for responding to care drain related problems (little financial sustainability)

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Conclusions

Precisely at a time when the European Union is promoting an economic, social and political integration policy perspective both internally and towards third countries, it is actually draining care resources from countries of origin, leaving local welfare systems to deal with the impact on their own.

The problem of care drain is not so far from us, as it strongly impacts on the family reunion process (the longer and not well managed the period of separation of a minor from his/her mother is, the worst is the integration process in the host country after reunion).

Policy recommendations:

- Support and reinforce the spontaneous activation of local welfare systems
- Promote transnational networks between social services in order to strengthen the psycho-social support to divided families (better communication during the period of separation = better reunion process and integration in the Country of arrival).
- Enhance the opportunities that stem from migration: reinforcing the impact of migration on the social well being and upgrading of families and communities back home.
- Dedicate more attention to transnational families support within European Funds promoting better migratory policies (i.e. EIF, Funding for Migration and Asylum).