# FAMILY CRISIS CAUSED BY MIGRATION

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**Abstract:** The migration phenomenon represents a current social issue. Often, migration is motivated by the desire for a better life, and the effects experienced by children affect most areas of reference: behavioural, social, emotional, and educational. Going abroad involves sacrifices both from the children's perspective and from that of their parents, and the crisis is felt by each family member individually, in a different way. In the absence of the departing parent, especially if they are the sole provider, the child feels abandoned and seeks attention through atypical behaviour, such as a strong cry for help. In this article, I have tried to detail how children left behind in the country perceive their parents' departure for work abroad, what are their adaptation methods, alongside the strategies parents use to support their children from afar. The exploratory research, undertaken within a master's thesis, may represent a starting point for further research on the proposed topic.

**Keywords**: family crisis, migration, child, parent, abroad, strategy.

**Résumé :** Le phénomène de la migration représente un problème social actuel. Souvent, la migration est motivée par le désir d'une meilleure vie, et les effets ressentis par les enfants affectent généralement tous les domaines de référence : comportemental, social, émotionnel et éducatif. Le départ à l'étranger implique des sacrifices tant du point de vue des enfants que de celui de leurs parents, et la crise est ressentie par chaque membre de la famille individuellement, de manière différente. En l'absence du parent parti, surtout s'il est le seul pourvoyeur, l'enfant se sent abandonné et attire l'attention par un comportement atypique, tel un cri de détresse puissant. Dans cet article, j'ai essayé de détailler comment les enfants laissés derrière eux dans le pays perçoivent le départ de leurs parents pour travailler à l'étranger, quelles sont leurs méthodes d'adaptation, ainsi que les stratégies utilisées par les parents pour soutenir leurs enfants à distance. La recherche exploratoire, entreprise dans le cadre d'une thèse de master, peut représenter un point de départ pour de futures recherches sur le thème proposé.

**Mots-clés :** crise familiale, migration, enfant, parent, étranger, stratégie.

**Rezumat:** Fenomenul migrației reprezintă o problemă socială de actualitate. Adesea, migrația este motivată de dorința unui trai mai bun, iar efectele pe care copii le resimt afectează de cele mai multe ori toate ariile de referință: comportamental, social, emoțional și educațional. Plecarea în străinătate implică sacrificii atât din partea copiilor, cât și din cea a părinților, iar criza este resimțită de fiecare membru al familiei în parte, într-un mod

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diferit. În lipsa părintelui plecat, mai ales dacă acesta este unicul susținător, copilul se simte abandonat și atrage atenția printr-un comportament atipic, ca un puternic strigăt de ajutor. În acest articol am încercat să detaliez cum percep copiii rămași în țară plecarea părinților la muncă peste hotare, care sunt modalitățile acestora de adaptare, alături de strategiile părinților de susținere a copiilor de la distanță. Cercetarea de explorare, întreprinsă în cadrul unei teze masterale, poate reprezenta un început pentru cercetările ulterioare privind tema propusă.

**Cuvinte cheie:** criză familială, migrație, copil, părinte, străinătate, strategie.

## 1. Introduction

The family remains the most important institution, and the family crisis caused by migration is felt by each member individually. While the children left behind try to adjust to the absence of their parents and the people who have remained in the country, the parents also undergo a long process of acquainting themselves with the new territories, struggling with longing for their loved ones.

In this sense, from an etymological point of view, migration refers to „the movement of people and their geographic relocation, either permanent or temporary" (Held, 2004, p. 326). In a broader sense, migration not only represents the movement to other territories but also the effects it has on cultural, religious, economic, social, and demographic aspects (Andreescu, 2016, p. 29).

Sociological theories of migration explain the causes, support methods, and consequences at the cultural, economic, and social levels. The role of social networks is considered a factor in the initiation, continuity, and completion of the migration process. These theories are based on the hypothesis that the integration of migrating individuals is closely related to social capital, and immigrants are influenced by both the country of origin and the destination country (Haas, 2010, p. 230).

According to the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption, in September 2022, there were 56,407 families with parents working abroad. Among them, 9,089 families have both parents working abroad, 40,293 families have only one parent working abroad, and 7,025 families have a single supporting parent working abroad.

The phenomenon of migration can be identified with multiple causes and at various levels, which reciprocally influence each other. Thus, the level of immediate causes refers to the parent's desire for higher incomes and improving the family's economic situation. The level of underlying causes refers to social services, attitudes, practices, and knowledge of the involved families and the community regarding the phenomenon and their rights. For example, the level of deep causes highlights values and opinions about migration, as well as roles and behaviours within the family (UNICEF, 2008, p. 3).

Migration as a phenomenon will undergo new characteristics and will never disappear, which will also happen in our country. For Romanians, the predominant motivation for leaving the country is the desire to improve living conditions both for themselves and for the rest of the family left behind. Among

the most popular destinations chosen by Romanians based on various criteria are: Italy, Spain, Germany, England, France, and Israel (Feraru, 2011, p. 152).

Even though people have always migrated, since the 19th century, the migration phenomenon has acquired a new trait, the migration of the workforce to financially attractive areas (Pavelescu, 2004, pp. 84-100). It can be said that the effects of migration involve numerous aspects, both negative and positive. These effects become evident in a short period (Tufan, 2007, p. 132).

Migration influences both emotional and physical relationships between family members. The mobility of parents leads to a new distribution of family roles and changes in the relationship between children and their parents. Certainly, there are numerous imbalances at the behavioural level of the children. For example, behaviour differs based on the family environment, level of education, and the ability to cope with imposed changes (Cătărău, 2019, p.11-19).

The departure of parents provides children with an improvement in basic needs satisfaction: food, better living conditions, clothing, or other things that can be purchased with new material resources. However, these cannot compensate for the emotional and social deficiencies. The process of socialization is affected by both intra-family and extra-family (Lupu, 2006, p. 45).

The socialization relationships within the family affected by migration largely depend on the ability to communicate from a distance. The confirmation of established connections is conditioned by the frequency and regularity of communication through modern means (Carling, 2012, p. 198). Family members use smart devices connected to the internet, combining interaction with communication with the family members who have remained at home, providing them with a general sense of unity (Tingyu, 2012, p. 152).

Some children exhibit numerous negative behavioural changes due to the physical absence of their parents. Before the migration process, children received primary care from their parents, but after the physical distance, primary care is provided, in the best cases, by grandparents, distant relatives, neighbours, or even older siblings (Merla, 2014, p. 90).

Certainly, migration impacts both the family and the psychological development of children. When parents migrate, children develop an insecure, disorganized, or ambivalent attachment. Another negative effect is the lack of trust in autonomy, which often reflects disorganized behaviour. Some adolescents, in particular, may exhibit aggressive or depressive behaviour (Barista-Pinto Wiese, 2010, p. 146). The mobility of parents deprives children of emotional support and parental affection. Furthermore, it has been found that „the pain of family separation as a result of parental migration creates various feelings: loneliness, helplessness, regret, guilt, vulnerability, and insecurity" (Maruja, 2013, p. 49).

The vast majority of families with members working abroad go through periods of crisis. These generate stress and thus affect the person's ability to act efficiently in such situations. Succumbing to emotions, the specific states and reactions of individuals going through a crisis include desperation, helplessness,

discomfort, apathy, impatience, impasse, confusion, surprise, and more (Dumitru, 2008, pp. 88-90).

Moreover, Holdevici (2011) defines a crisis as „a situation in which a person faces a major obstacle that blocks their life goals." Furthermore, a crisis can be characterized as a crucial moment, and its outcome depends on how the individual reacts to resolving it. If the crisis is resolved, it is considered that the individual has evolved, and learned something new, while if not, the crisis can evoke numerous maladaptive reactions and can lead to mental disorders.

As a result of parental migration, children have developed certain behaviours to cope with the changes. These behaviours can be summarized as coping strategies adopted by children and play an important role in explaining the manifestation of negative behaviours in transnational families (Cătărău, 2019, pp. 48-49).

## 2. Methods: Participants, Instruments

The field research conducted between March and June 2023 was qualitative and utilized semi-structured interviews and sociological field observation. The interview guide focused on the following sub-themes: family situation, causes and effects of migration, modes of communication among transnational family members, strategies of adaptation for children left alone at home, and ways in which parents support their children. The observation grid proved to be useful in complementing information obtained during interviews through facial expressions, gestures, clothing, etc.

The research group consisted of 11 children, both male and female, aged between 9 and 17 years (referred to in the analysis as „Respondent 1" to „Respondent 11"). These are beneficiaries of *Save the Children Iaşi Association*, from two Educational Centers, that have at least one parent working abroad for a minimum of two years. Parents of the children signed an informed consent form, were ensured of the anonymity of their responses, and agreed to have their conversations recorded. Additionally, three specialists – a psych pedagogue, a psychologist, and a social worker – working within the *Save the Children Association Iasi*, participated in the research (referred to in the analysis by their respective roles).

## 3. Results

We will list the results obtained respecting the previously stated sub-themes. We make it clear that the data collected primarily represent the perspective of the young people interviewed and only some information was rechecked with the specialists from the *Save the Children Association Iasi.*

### Family Situation

The vast majority of respondents come from single-parent families, a situation caused either by the death of one parent or by divorce. They strongly feel

the absence of the parent who is not present in the family, especially if the sole provider also goes to work abroad.

*Material Situation of Families*

The material situation of the families is modest, with a significant portion of the income coming from the earnings of the parent working abroad. Moreover, the jobs they have are mainly in the agricultural sector, and they are individuals with a medium level of education who aspire to improve the situation of their children.

*Common Family Crisis Due to Migration*

All families to which the children belong are experiencing a common crisis caused by migration. In this regard, all family members, from children to parents and other involved members, go through a process of adaptation and often require external and specialized support for an extended period.

*Causes of Migration*

Migration abroad involves sacrifices both for children and parents. In most cases, migration is motivated by the desire for a better life. Often, in other countries, it is easier to find well-paid jobs even without specialized training in that field.

*„Although it affects me a lot, I know that my dad left to earn more and provide everything we need for me and my brother"* (Respondent 11, 17 years old, female).

Unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, parents do not take into account the risks that the family faces when they decide to work abroad. They do not balance the financial resources with the harmonious development of the child and the family imbalance; instead, they focus mostly on improving the material situation, which they believe will cover other deficiencies. Moreover, going abroad, in some cases, is like a decision that follows the parents' separation.

*„I know that mom and dad used to argue a lot, and after mom left, she didn't even tell me and my brother. I found out later from grandma that they had separated"* (Respondent 1, 9 years old, male).

*Effects of Migration*

Children whose parents have left and are left in the care of others feel the longing for a complete family and compare themselves to those around them who represent the ideal image of a family: mom, dad, and child/children. Through this comparison, the child feels different, and their self-esteem decreases, leading to communication problems, difficulties in forming relationships, and attention issues.

*„When I was in kindergarten, my uncle had to come and pick me up, and we were always the last ones to leave, watching how all the other kids were being*

*picked up by their parents, except me. I always hoped that my mom and dad would come for me at least once, and I would feel like I belong to a normal family"* (Respondent 10, 17 years old, female).

In the majority of cases, the departure of parents negatively affects the educational journey of the children left behind. Often, there is a lack of interest in completing school tasks, and a refusal to learn, or even to attend school. Moreover, the need for family belonging shifts to the need for group belonging.

*„After my mom left, and my brother and I stayed with our dad, we tried to fill up all our free time: we started playing rugby, we come to the centre to get involved in various activities, and we focus more on school"* (Respondent 6, 12 years old, male).

*„It affected me a lot from an educational point of view when I saw other kids with their parents, and I couldn't concentrate. Now I managed to control myself better and understand the situation differently"* (Respondent 10, 17 years old, female).

In fortunate cases, the sacrifice of parents working abroad is understood, and the children comprehend the departure for financial reasons. In this regard, children in this category focus more on school, even though it is difficult for them, as a way to please the parent who left, as a kind of gift.

*„In the beginning, after my dad left, I struggled at school, and got a few lower grades, but then I improved. I managed to turn things around at school because I knew I needed to study, and my dad left for me and my brother, so we wouldn't lack anything"* (Respondent 11, 17 years old, female).

Educational problems are attributed to the assumption of multiple roles by some children after the departure of the parent who was responsible for those tasks. This is more common in cases where the mother is the one who left abroad.

*„Since mom went to the Netherlands, and my brother and I stayed with our dad, I take care of everything related to the house: cleaning, preparing meals, cooking. I do this every day because dad goes to work from morning till evening"* (Respondent 6, 12 years old, male).

In this regard, during the age of 13-17, children are in adolescence, a period that comes with many more challenges, physiological and hormonal changes, and educational changes. At this age, children need much more attention, viewing things with the extra baggage of vulnerability to avoid adopting risky behaviours and getting involved with negative influences. On the other hand, in the period of 9-13, there is greater tolerance towards the migration process of parents. Due to the excitement of the promised material goods, children more easily accept their parents' departure, especially if the remaining family member or parent fosters communication and a good relationship between the child and the parent who left.

*Ways of communication between transnational family members*

In the majority of cases, parents stay abroad for several months, and communication becomes increasingly difficult. Most of the interviewed children keep in touch with their parents through social media networks and talk to their mother or father who is abroad, in the happiest cases, through video calls, and phone calls as well. These calls take place daily, and in this way, the longing is not felt as much; parents participate in the stages of growth their children go through, and the children do not feel abandoned but rather experience the support and involvement of their parents, despite the distance that separates them.

> *„I talk to my mom several times a day, starting with the morning call when I let her know I'm going to school, and she tells me about her work that day, until we say goodnight and go to sleep. Throughout the day, we talk whenever something comes up and we need to know about each other"* (Respondent 5, 11 years old, male).

Despite technological advancements and numerous communication possibilities available today, children still feel the longing for physical presence and face-to-face communication, as is the case with respondent 10, especially when the period since they last saw each other is very long.

> *„I talked to my mom more before; we had periods when we talked every day, but I would like her to come more often. I don't even remember how many years it's been since she was home to see me"* (Respondent 10, 17 years old, female).

Unfortunately, there are situations where communication between children and their departed parents does not exist in any form: phone calls, video calls, etc. The departure abroad was an escape for some family members, leading to the family's breakup. As in the case of respondent number 7, the father started a new life, with another family abroad, forgetting about the loved ones left behind, contributing to a feeling of abandonment.

> *„I don't even remember when my dad left; I was too young. I know we talked to him for a while, but now I don't even know if he's still alive or not. We don't talk about this at home; I know he left, started a new family abroad, and he doesn't care about us, so why should we care about him?"* (Respondent 7, 14 years old, male).

*Strategies of adaptation for children left alone at home*

The phenomenon of migration has always existed, and if family members do not handle the situation well, major imbalances can arise, even leading to the breakup of the family. The relationships between partners cool down, and here it would be preferable to give the greatest importance. As specialists working with children in educational centres assert, the most emphasis should be placed on maintaining a strong emotional bond, even despite the distance.

*„Unfortunately, many parents often say, 'It's okay; my child is young, and he/she doesn't understand what's happening.' But what do you think he/she feels when they wake up and see that their mom, dad, or another important person is absent? At that moment, the child feels a sense of abandonment, and the better we prepare the ground and build a family plan, the less these changes will affect children who experience the situation of one parent leaving abroad"* (Social worker, 54 years old, male).

Age is a very important aspect to which the child is subjected during this change. In some cases, children have been left at home in the care of other people from a very young age, without projecting the image of a complete family, and in this sense, they do not feel the absence of parents as strongly.

*„I always imagine what it would have been like with both parents; I can't feel the longing because I have never lived with them. I was too young when they left, and my memories are very vague. My grandparents are like parents to me, and my uncle is like an older brother"* (Respondent 10, 17 years old, female).

The strategies adopted by children differ, and the feeling of abandonment is common in most cases. Some children are forced to take on the roles that the absent parent left unfulfilled. Regardless of the strategy applied, no child is not affected at least to some extent by the departure of their parents. Even so, to minimize the negative impact, the child needs to be prepared in advance for the changes that are about to occur and be informed about the reasons behind this decision.

*Methods of parental support for the children*

Parents can support their children who are left at home from a distance through various methods, but especially with the help of current technology. Nowadays, we have applications that allow video calls with just a click away, and the longing is diminished. However, regular visits and spending quality time together are preferred, so that the child feels valued and important.

*„The meetings between children and parents should be moments of celebration, filled with games and good bonding. Sharing emotions, thoughts, and feelings should be essential. Parents should assure their children that they are away for a while, but they are still with them and working for a better future"* (Psychologist, 49 years old, female).

The support that parents offer is mostly material, and emotional relationships are put on the back burner. To prevent relationships from cooling down and to maintain a functional family dynamic without a crisis, material resources must be complemented with emotional ones. Families going through the process of adaptation due to the departure of one member abroad need more than ever mutual support, words of encouragement, and appreciation.

When the parent returns home, even for a short period, children are extremely happy, but the adaptation is lasting and difficult. Often, until the adaptation occurs, the parent is forced to return to work. Other children may not succeed in adapting to the parent being at home and may express that things are better when the parent is away.

Communication is essential, and the child needs to know that the parent left to work but will return after a predetermined period. It is very important to know who will take care of the child and to complete all legal formalities in this regard. Parents can supervise their children from a distance with the help of technology and trustworthy individuals remaining in the country. Often, especially in single-provider families, grandparents take on the role of the mother or father.

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*Recommendations for managing family crises*

The common feeling that children experience is abandonment. In this regard, it is recommended to provide explanations to the child. The family plan and the changes that occur within the family should be made together with the child, regardless of their age. The child should know what to expect, rather than being confronted with a fait accompli without prior preparation. Additionally, the child should know who will be taking care of them at home, and that person should take responsibility for the role they have assumed.

The departure abroad involves sacrifices for both the children and the parents, and special attention should be given to the methods of support that parents adopt, even from a distance. Thanks to technology, phone calls and video calls are accessible to everyone, and they help maintain relationships and diminish the longing for loved ones to some extent. Communication is even more crucial, as the lack of it can lead to the cooling of relationships between partners, which may result in the dissolution of the family.

Another recommendation refers to involving children in age-appropriate tasks and responsibilities, as excessive demands and over-responsibility can endanger their future. The child should feel that they are experiencing childhood, and their tasks should largely involve educational progress.

The majority of children show disinterest in school, and their educational progress is negatively influenced. Moreover, the need for family belonging shifts towards group belonging. In this regard, the recommendation is to involve children in activities that promote and consolidate life skills, creative stimulation, recreation, and age-specific socialization. All these aspects favour adaptation in the absence of a parent and increase the chances of recovering educational gaps, social integration, and self-esteem. In this sense, all individuals involved in activities with children, from teachers to social workers, psycho-pedagogues, and psychologists,

should pay attention to the changes the child is going through. Many behaviours may go unnoticed, which hinders the appropriate intervention.

Unfortunately, many parents do not take into account the risks that the family is exposed to when deciding to go abroad. The money earned is not balanced with the children's development, and relationships deteriorate over time. Therefore, in situations where children or parents feel overwhelmed, the recommendation is to seek help.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussions

This study was exploratory and aimed to explore children's perception of their parent's departure abroad, their adaptation methods, and the strategies parents adopt to support their families from a distance. The array of changes that each child and parent go through is different, but common elements are found in the vast majority of cases.

In this regard, I refer to the recommendation of involving the child in socializing activities, spending leisure time, and developing skills. Constant communication, even from a distance, with the child is essential, along with providing explanations and informing them about the changes that will occur at the family level, namely, the departure abroad. Moreover, it is important to leave the children in the care of trustworthy individuals with whom the child feels safe.

The child should be informed that the parent is leaving for a temporary period and will return, motivating this decision, which is usually economic. It is also crucial for material possessions to be complemented by strong emotional relationships despite the distance. Children need to know they are loved and appreciated, thus eliminating or reducing the feeling of abandonment, which is common when parents leave and children stay at home.

Although migration brings many changes, the process of adaptation can be eased through extensive communication and involving children in age-appropriate tasks. As evidenced by the respondents in this research, the majority stated that attending activities within the Educational Centers has had a tremendous impact on their daily lives and made their adaptation in the absence of parents much easier by spending leisure time in a secure environment that offered them the help that parents usually provide.

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