

## Research summary

### **HOW CHILDREN CAN BE SUPPORTED AFTER THEIR PARENTS LEAVE TO WORK ABROAD**

Findings from the study Children left behind in labor migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families in the EU (CASTLE)

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#### **Who we are**

The Center for the Study of Transnational Families within Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj, the Academy of Economic Studies from the Republic of Moldova, and the Ukrainian Institute of Social Research after Oleksandr Yaremenko. We were supported by the delegations of the Terre des hommes Foundation from Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova, within the CASTLE international action project ("Children left at home as a result of labor migration").

#### **Introduction**

At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, we took an interest in the situation of children left at home after their parents temporarily went to work abroad. We wanted to clarify how children's rights suffer (from education to health, relationships, etc.) in this situation. We also wanted to see how families with absent parents can be supported. We were particularly interested in what children had to say about these things, as their perspective is rarely studied or listened to.

#### **Definitions**

We called transnational families those families with at least one parent who went abroad and a child who stayed at home.

#### **What we want**

The research proposes that the opinions of these children who stay at home and their families are also heard in society. It is useful to know their problems and how they want to be supported, but also what families can do better.

In this summary, we will present examples of good practices that children and families recommend to other families with parents abroad, migrant parents, stay-at-home parents (or other caregivers), or stay-at-home children. They will also be useful to experts, namely officials, employees of state institutions and NGOs, as well as other professionals who know the problems of transnational families.

The following best practices were based on these findings and are structured around the analysis themes identified in the data analysis process.

## **The situation and opinions of children in the context of migration**

"Dad [in Germany] showed me that deer come to some towns and people don't hurt them at all. Here, if you see a deer, we hunt it immediately. Where my father worked was an old, historic building. There are many places where you can see history through some buildings that have been repaired as they were before". (Moldova)

How children understand 'foreign' and 'home' is important and can influence the child's personal experience when one of the parents has migrated. That is why it is good to give the children the opportunity to visit their parents in the country they migrated to. As we found from the research, many children occasionally visited the country of destination of their migrant parents or even other countries during their travels. In addition to personal impressions, they also pay attention to what their parents or colleagues tell them. Thus, since many parents are in this situation of migrating, for the child abroad becomes another kind of home, i.e. something "normal", which is "not worth mentioning" (and therefore leaving hurts him less).

The child must learn from the parent that he is thinking of emigrating and understand why, discuss all the consequences with him, and thus he will be calmer. Through our study, we learned that children are rarely told that their parents will migrate, and they have no say in their decisions. Although they do not explain the reasons, adults still expect the children to understand and accept the parents' reasons, often economic. We must not lose sight of the fact that any child still suffers a strong sense of loss and lack of a parent, and explanations can "sweeten" the situation.

However, if there is a closeness in the relationship between the siblings who stay at home, the adaptation of the children to the new situation (lack of parents) will be easier. Children can become more independent, support each other, actively participate in the family household and even provide moral support to migrant adults.

Children and young people believe that leaving and migration should be limited to a certain purpose and to a certain period of time (they "should leave for a certain period and for a certain purpose, then come back" – a child left at home, Moldova, - "he knows that a family is waiting for him at home", a child left in Ukraine).

Family migration for labor can be a good thing at the same time, helping children's future prospects, and educational and career opportunities. By earning a better income than they could earn in their home country, parents can more easily cover their children's education expenses. Study abroad (or the plan not to go) is discussed most often, with a large proportion of young people having a definite plan to study abroad even from high school or later, some refusing to go, while others are undecided ("I might study here or there, I haven't decided yet" – a child left behind, Ukraine).

### **Relationship with caregivers**

The relationship between children left behind and their caregivers can improve, but the keeper must remain only the keeper and not replace the departed parent, because "you can't replace a person" - as one Ukrainian child participant in the study observes.

However, there are cases where caregivers can become welcome and useful models for the future (such as the case of a young Moldovan whose uncle, a lawyer, became a role model for him, his parents having a more modest profession).

### **Youth activities, coping strategies, support groups**

It is important for children whose parents are away to feel supported by other children and accepted. Only in this way will they have the confidence that they are still important in society.

Many children and young people recognized the need for support from peers, social media groups, teachers, and possibly organizations (although the latter was unclear) (Moldova, Ukraine), also confessing that they felt interest and support from teachers, neighbors, adult acquaintances, the church community or psychologists.

"...Because I was always busy with homework or workout and I tried to eliminate these thoughts with the help of the time when I was busy." (a child left at home in Moldova).

Although there is no compensation for the absence of a parent, children and young people need to develop their self-esteem and be encouraged to get involved in extra-curricular activities, interest groups, initiative groups, or other means and groups to compensate for their feelings of loss or loneliness.

### **Transnational relations and communication as perceived by children**

Constant communication is very helpful in the life of transnational families. However, depending on their age, children understand the phenomenon of the parent's migration to work differently. Previous experiences in the family also matter. For teenagers, it is more difficult, because they feel more acutely the lack of a deadline for the return of the parent and the rupture. Also, some of the parents who answered our questions seem to attribute the differences to gender as well: "girls are getting closer to their mothers at this age", "boys need their fathers at his age and I'm not there".

In general, children and adults communicate a lot through the Internet, which helps a lot. Sometimes the communication is from group to group or through other people (adults at home); also, children use the Internet a lot to get information, in the absence of parents as a source of information. In a number of cases, remote communication also takes place with the child's school. Despite the difficulties migrant parents face today in communicating with their children, the situation was much worse before the new technology was available.

The situation has improved a lot in this area. "It happened (in the past) that we would talk even once a month because we only had Sundays off and I could go to that phone place (ie a place where they could access cheaper international calls) only on Sundays and sometimes I would call and no one was home. (...)." (a migrant parent, Moldova)

The Internet is a regular presence in the lives of many migrants: "we live with the Internet..." (Moldova migrant parent); "Uncle Google will help with everything" (a migrant parent, Ukraine).

At the same time, there is some caution and the assumption that some of the information online is unreliable. Consequently, the information is verified through direct dialogue with the people: "I follow Facebook and Instagram, I am aware of what is happening in Moldova. I read the comments and what people are saying. There are different opinions, you don't know which one to believe. What you read and see on the Internet is one thing" (Moldova migrant parent). The nature of their work, their work schedule, and time differences are a hindrance to permanent communication between migrant parents and their children at home, although they make efforts to ensure permanent communication. Migrants' work schedules can get in the way when children need to communicate. "We talked once every 2-3 days, depending on my schedule. If I worked late into the night, we could talk once every 3-4 days. If I worked the second shift, we would talk a little in the morning or evening. Not very often." (a migrant parent, Moldova).

Parents and children may sometimes worry too much about each other through (perhaps over) protection. Thus, something positive (attention, care) becomes negative and burdensome.

The authorities should be informed about the situation of their children left at home and the people responsible for their care. Apparently, this happens often, and the procedures allow parents to send documents electronically (email) to the town halls as well, even other channels like Viber being accepted.

"We request nicely, we inform... Especially now, since the law has been changed, they have the possibility to send from abroad, to send the sheet written by them, namely, they send it... They also have the possibility via Viber, as well as by mail, that is, there are more (possibilities) in the law" (Moldova expert).

.....For support or other details.....

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More information on the websites of partners in the project: [www.tdh.ro](http://www.tdh.ro); [www.childhub.org](http://www.childhub.org); <https://tdh-ukraine.org/en>; <https://tdh-moldova.org/>; <https://fspac.ubbcluj.ro/castle/en>; <https://ase.md/>; <http://www.uisr.org.ua/>.

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