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Department of Social Work and Social Administration
The University of Hong Kong
香港大學社會工作及社會行政學系



融幼社
PathFinders



CHILDREN AT THE HEART OF MIGRATION

Ensuring All Children Affected by Migration
are Protected and Respected

May 2023

Established in 2008 on the belief no child should be born alone and deprived of an identity, basic supplies, healthcare and shelter, PathFinders ensures some of the most vulnerable and unsupported children in Hong Kong (HK) are protected and respected, and their migrant mothers are empowered to find a path to a brighter future. To date, we have touched the lives of over 10,400 babies, children and women.

In HK all working women are entitled to 14 weeks of maternity leave, including Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs). By maintaining job security a pregnant MDW is able to access public services, including healthcare vital for prenatal and newborn care. Maternity leave also provides an MDW mother with time to nurture and settle her child with family in her home country, before returning to work to provide for their future.

Despite legal protections, each year hundreds of expectant MDW mothers are unlawfully fired, pressured to leave or resign. When this happens, she immediately becomes homeless and within two weeks, when her working visa expires, loses access to public services. For those unable to return home, their children are typically the most vulnerable - undocumented and without access to healthcare, shelter and education.

The majority of the 340,000 MDWs in HK are women of child-bearing age (Experian, 2019). Often social and cultural norms in their home countries don't encourage comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and/or gender equality. Many are also working mothers who leave children behind.

At PathFinders our:

Crisis Intervention services provide comfort, care and counselling to migrant mothers and children in crisis. In addition, access to emergency shelter, essential supplies, healthcare and education.

Crisis Prevention programmes empower MDWs to make well-informed life decisions while working in HK, and provide employers with support to ensure pregnant MDWs maintain job security and access to public services.

Systemic Change initiatives engage the general public to increase understanding and support for children born to MDWs, and seek the creation of solutions for employers to continuously support their household needs if/when their MDW is on long-term leave.

By 2047 the HKSAR Government anticipates needing 600,000 MDWs to help care for a rapidly ageing population (Siu, 2017). To maintain, and ideally decrease, the number of women and children requiring our **Crisis Intervention** services over the coming years, we plan to scale our **Crisis Prevention** and **Systemic Change** programmes to tackle an emerging and potential crisis for migrant children.

On the occasion of our 15th Anniversary we reaffirm our commitment to the protection and respect of all children affected by migration - including using our voice to raise awareness and advocate for stronger protections for children left behind.

Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA) is a longitudinal research project investigating the longer term impact of growing up in transnational families on children across Southeast Asia.



The current round of CHAMPSEA (3), led by Dr. Lucy Jordan of the University of Hong Kong - The longer-term impact of parental labour migration: Well-being, indebtedness and family sustainability in Southeast Asia project - builds on and extends an established mixed-methods programme of research on CHAMPSEA. Its aim is to contribute to the debate about a potential 'crisis of care' in the region as increasing numbers of parents migrate overseas for work, leaving their children behind.

The study investigates the financial, physical, and psychological health of migrants' families in Indonesia and the Philippines, the two major origin countries for more than 340,000 domestic workers in HK.

While evidence to date suggests that the short-term impact of parental migration varies according to which parent migrates and other family circumstances, very little is known about the longer-term costs and benefits for children and other family members who remain in migrant sending countries.

The study aims to extend understanding and provide the sound evidence needed for the development of effective policies and practices around labour migration both within origin countries and within destination regions, such as HK.

WE ARE LIKE AIR

Award-winning photographer Xyza Cruz Bacani tells the tale of her mother, a Filipino MDW who has spent half of her life in HK. Also featuring the stories of other female MDWs, this compilation of black-and-white photographs offers a poignant account of their life away from home.

Bacani, who used to be an MDW herself, reclaims the story of the migrant worker that has been told countless times by others. This time, she is telling their story – not as victims but as champions who have overcome the many hardships life has tossed at them as they leave their families behind in their home country.

The book portrays the experience of millions of mothers, daughters and families whose lives have been disrupted by migration. It is titled "We Are Like Air" because migrant workers are often treated like air, invisible but important.



"We Are Like Air" is available at: www.we-press.com/en/product/we-are-like-air

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“Migrant workers are often treated like air, invisible but important.”

I am grateful to the migrant community for allowing me to be the conduit of their stories. It is a healing process, and it bridges the gap created by years of separation in our family. Our story is not unique. It mirrors the experiences of many MDWs and their children in Hong Kong.

Each We Are Like Air exhibition is more than just a chance to share a vital narrative; it is a chance to honour the migrant women and mothers and see them as champions. I hope my photographs and our story will help to bring mothers and children closer together and foster better communication so that they may never feel alone.

XYZA CRUZ BACANI

ABBREVIATIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAMPSEA	Child Health & Migrant Parents in South-East Asia
CRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
HK	Hong Kong
MDW	Migrant domestic worker
NCF	Nurturing Care Framework
OFW	Overseas Filipino Worker
OWWA	Overseas Worker Welfare Administration
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
WHO	World Health Organization

PathFinders would like to express its gratitude for the research support provided Ratna Gill (M.A., Harvard Kennedy School) and by the following graduate students at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong: Ines Huynh, Thida Kim, and Priscilla Adeline.

INTRODUCTION

To date, most migration management and labour policies neglect to adequately reflect the potential impact of migration on children. Discussions typically focus on the economic benefits of remittance incomes, but often overlook any potential and detrimental impacts on a child’s protection, health, and development.

There are approximately 340,000 MDWs in HK and the government anticipates needing 600,000 MDWs by 2047 to help care for a rapidly ageing population. This is considered the most economical option for lower and middle income families to participate in the labour force while having their childcare, eldercare and household maintenance needs met.

While migration is, and will continue to be an important engine of economic growth for families, it is crucial governments and other stakeholders put in place safeguarding mechanisms to prevent any negative social impacts of migration on children before mass migration of women is encouraged as caregivers for ageing populations.

Many MDWs are mothers, who leave children behind to be cared for by partners, extended family and even local paid domestic workers. In the Philippines, with over 2 million overseas workers, it is estimated that millions of children are left behind (Yeung & Bacani, 2020).

Over 90% of MDWs who come to HK are women of childbearing age. As observed and assisted by PathFinders over the last 15 years, some fall victim to love scams, sexual abuse, and unplanned pregnancies while living and working in HK. With better support systems in place to improve their quality of employment and life experience in the destination region, the more this can positively impact the well-rounded health and development of their children left behind.

Limited research on what is known as the “care triangle” – the relationship between an MDW and the child they are looking after -- describes the transformation of care work into a “love labour”. Young adults who received long-term care from one MDW throughout their childhood treasure the

love they received and often maintain contact with the MDW after the formal contracts have ended (Hoiting, 2021).

As set out in this report, more needs to be done to understand and clearly establish the link between child well-being and labour and migration policies to respect and protect all children.

Through the publication of this report we hope to initiate a dialogue to further explore strategies and opportunities for collaboration among NGOs, government departments and other stakeholders - across both sending and destination regions - that are aware, engaged, and willing to work together to ensure all children affected by migration are protected and respected.



I left my daughter when she was 2 years old to give her a better future. It was a struggle not being able to go home during the pandemic. She always told me that I missed many special events like her birthday and Christmas.

A few months ago, I planned a surprise homecoming. At first she didn’t recognise me. After a while, she started cuddling me, which I missed so much. The above picture was taken the next morning when she woke up beside me. I realised she was growing so fast.

NURTURING CARE PRINCIPLES FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), published in 2018 by the World Health Organization (WHO), refers to a secure and safe environment created by parents and other caregivers. It ensures that a child's good health and nutrition, and protection from threats and opportunities for early learning, are backed by interactions that are emotionally supportive. Connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their joint objectives can enable children's well rounded development and help to ensure all have a fair start in life and none are left behind.

The NCF reinforces the profound impact of early experience on a child's development, with the most critical from pregnancy to age three when a child is most susceptible to environmental influences, including nutrition, social and emotional experiences. It is during this period that the majority of a child's brain is formed, growing faster than at any other time in their life.

Investing in this period is one of the most efficient and effective ways to help eliminate extreme poverty and inequality, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital needed for economies to thrive (Yip et al., 2019).

More recently an evidence-based argument has been presented for the extension of the NCF from preconception through adolescence (0-20 years), organised into five developmental areas: Safety, Relationships, Learning, Health and Nutrition.

The NCF incorporates an equity focus by providing a roadmap that transforms child rights into action. Extending throughout childhood and adolescence it offers opportunities to support and alter developmental trajectories that enhance resilience and mitigate consequences of adversities.

All components of the NCF are necessary and interdependent. Compromised function in one component may disrupt function in other components. For example, undernutrition may interfere with health and learning, or an



abusive environment can hinder socioemotional development. Conversely, improved function in one component may enable functioning in other components.

Embedded in enabling laws, policies and programmes, the NCF can help to mitigate adversities, enhance resilience, and promote the well-being of children left behind.



BACKGROUND ON CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

Often parents migrate due to limited job opportunities in their community or because available jobs do not pay enough to sustain a family. Higher-paying jobs elsewhere may allow parents to improve their family's living situation.

International child-focused organisations have long been aware that children who are left behind due to parental migration face unique challenges. A significant body of research shows that some children who stay behind with fathers and other caregivers may face mental health vulnerabilities when their mothers are absent. However, the alternative caregiving arrangements in which these children are raised are a significant protective factor in ensuring they have healthy, happy childhoods.

Research provides examples that show children may be able to access better education opportunities due to the remittances their mothers send back, but difficulty concentrating may impede their ability to perform well in school. Children may have difficulty connecting with their new caregivers, and in the worst cases, may become the victims of neglect and abuse. However, others may develop strong bonds with caregivers who provide consistent and high-quality care, and are able to benefit from increased remittances more fully. Weighing the benefits of increased income due to maternal migration against potential developmental risk requires understanding cultural context and the experiences of individual left-behind children.

Drawing on the NCF, this report explores the impacts of maternal labour migration on left behind children. By mitigating potential detrimental effects in these areas, local nonprofits in HK can be instrumental in ensuring that just because these children are left behind in their home countries, they are not left behind in terms of their well-rounded development.



A Mother's Love Knows No Borders shares the stories of how migrant mothers and the children they leave behind stay connected, despite the distance.

For 50 years MDWs have migrated to work in HK and create brighter futures for their families.

No words can adequately express the complex range of emotions MDW mothers feel when they

- perform the heart-wrenching ritual of saying goodbye to their children.
- face the daily struggle of juggling a heavy workload and making time to ensure their children are safe, healthy, eating well, coping with their studies, developing healthy friendships and reaching their potential.
- become overwhelmed with a deep longing to be a constant part of their children's emotional world.

MATERNAL MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING

Many mothers migrate to HK as domestic workers to ensure their children have a fair start in life through greater economic security and increased access to services, such as quality education and healthcare - but a number of barriers stand in their way.

While increased income from remittances can lead to improved outcomes for their children, research shows a range of factors may negatively affect a child's health, education and psychosocial development. Before weighing these it's first important to consider the barriers to sending money home.

Research from Indonesia suggests only a very small impact of remittances on poverty reduction, with a 10% increase in remittances linked to a 2% reduction in poverty. While remittances may contribute to improvements in living standards, they may be less effective in contributing to long-term upward mobility, and the movement of future generations into higher-wage jobs. Basic household needs must be met before being able to spend on longer-term investments, such as children's education, building a house, investing in business and saving for older age (Nahar & Arshad, 2017).

Research from HK shows economic well-being of migrants' families may also be influenced by the reduced incentive for other family members to work (Lim & Visaria, 2020). For example, a father taking on more household responsibilities may perceive his wife as the primary breadwinner and be therefore less likely to take up employment, which could put additional burden on household finances .

Other barriers may include the low usage of formal banking systems (80% of MDWs receive their wages in cash) and the high cost of remitting due to the lack of competition among institutions facilitating remittances. Additionally, low willingness to take on MDWs as clients can lead to MDWs opting for extractive rates: for example, an Indonesian MDW could lose over 10% of her earnings to fees when sending money home (Nahar & Arshad, 2017).

Additional compounding factors include the cost of living in destination countries, where MDWs may need to spend a large percentage of their low wages on sustaining themselves, leaving less to send home. As well, sizable employment agency fees for the service of placing workers with their employers causes many migrants to start their migration journey significantly in debt.



Enrich empowers MDWs in HK with tools to overcome financial difficulties and achieve their goals and dreams. Although MDWs may earn higher salaries in HK than in their home countries, a lack of financial literacy leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the enormous pressures on their finances, including recruitment debt, family obligations, extortionate interest rates or scams (Experian, 2019).

Enrich graduates learn how to:

- **Plan and save for the future** - use their time in HK to plan for a future with greater financial security
- **Communicate effectively with family & friends** - withstand financial pressures from family and friends, as well as engage family in working towards goals together
- **Make informed financial decisions** - make wise judgements to plan and protect their finances

SAFETY

Young children cannot adequately protect themselves and are vulnerable to unanticipated danger, physical pain and emotional stress. Children can experience extreme fear when people abandon them - or threaten to abandon or punish them - with toddlers being the group most often harshly punished. These experiences can cause uncontrollable fear and stress that can programme the child's response system and lead to emotional, mental and social maladjustment (WHO, 2018).

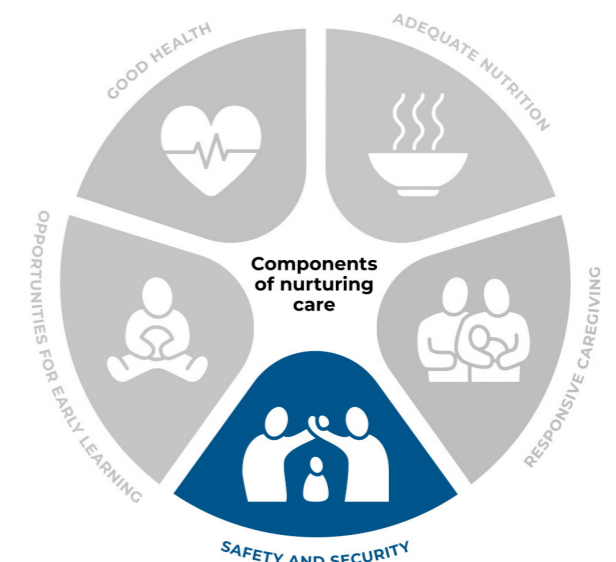
Parents play a pivotal role in children's physical and emotional development. When a parent migrates to work, this may result in economic benefit for the family back home, but must be weighed against what children miss out on by not having direct parenting as they grow.

A body of research that examines the impact of migration on child development in the Global South suggests a detrimental effect on mental health, including lowered self-esteem, higher stress levels, rates of depression and anxiety, and increased feelings of loneliness and helplessness (Shi et al, 2016).

Strain on extended family relationships may also be a way in which maternal migration negatively influences important formative relationships that children have in their lives. In many cases, extended family members provide additional emotional support when mothers are absent due to migration. However:

"Extended kin generally are not altruistic. They tend to accept their added workload with some hesitation. They view the work left behind to them by migrant mothers as a burden and cultural expectation that they have no choice but to fulfil" (Parreñas, 2001).

This may have unintended negative psychological consequences on how well adjusted and supported a child feels, if they are being taken care of by overstretched and exhausted extended family members.



Kampung Hong Kong is an example of a multi-stakeholder collaboration that works with the Local District of Ponorogo (Indonesia) to support MDWs and their families. Led by the Center for Population and Policy Studies at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), together with BP3MI - Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Service Center - a village will be established and focused on the needs of those migrating to HK. UGM is a long-term CHAMPSEA research partner, further enabling the potential impact of this multi-stakeholder collaboration. Interventions and assistance will focus on the different needs of MDWs and their families during key stages of migration:

- **Pre-departure:** Preparation and training, including skills, financial literacy, family support and socio-cultural adaptation
- **Overseas:** Protection, assistance, and consultancy while in HK on financial, social and cultural remittances, and maintaining regular contact
- **Returnees:** Re-integration & return to work

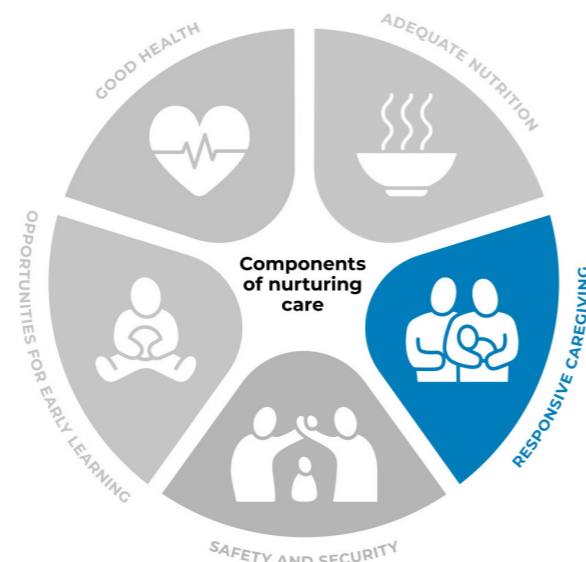


RELATIONSHIPS

Children rely on caregivers to recognise and respond to their needs, not only for nutrition and safety, but also for social engagement, cognitive stimulation, emotional regulation and soothing. When caregivers are sensitive, responsive, predictable and loving, they facilitate social and emotional development, promote secure emotional attachment, and help children to learn. There are opportunities to provide support to both fathers and extended family members, including grandparents, who take on the role of caregivers of children left behind.

New research on alternative caregiving arrangements indicates the characteristics and context of the new “family” in which a child left behind grows up can cause mental health outcomes to vary significantly. For example, having a stable caregiver may matter more than the type of caregiver for children’s mental health (Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2017). In addition, the mental health of the alternative caregiver themselves may have an impact on the strength of a child’s mental health outcomes (Fu et al., 2023). Some children may have strong bonds with their caregiver, while others may not. While the wellbeing of the caregiver is a likely predictor of the impact of migration on the child, providing more support for caregivers in their duties, as well as overall mental health, are key for supporting children left behind.

One area of promise is the frequency and depth of conversations with parents who are absent, which can serve as a significant protective factor for children. Conversations that go beyond “how was your day” and touch on school life, learning experience and feelings facilitate increased secure attachment of children to parents (Waruwu, 2021; Zhao et al., 2014). Additionally, evidence from Japan suggests providing adolescents with basic training on empathetic listening empowers them to become effective informal counsellors for their peers. Increased self-efficacy and listening scores, and decreasing anger and hostility, as witnessed after students underwent peer “counselling”, suggests a potential model exists to help combat feelings of depression and loneliness (Nozawa et al., 2019).



Marites’ Story: This year was my first trip home after three years. My daughter and I had a great time bonding. I saw how she has grown up. She is responsible for washing her own clothes and my father’s clothes. She became mature at an early age. I left her with my oldest sister, who is a teacher and holds a PhD in Education. Her husband is a police officer. They play an important role in my daughter’s upbringing. She has been brought up the right way, and is loved by the whole family. This makes her happy and complete while I am away.

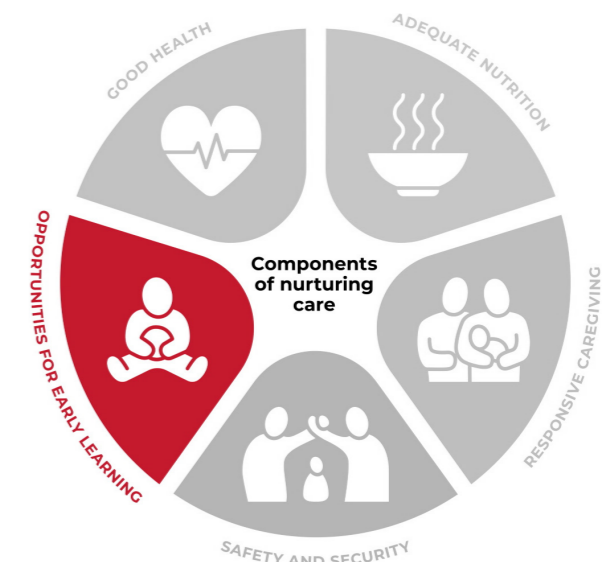
LEARNING

Learning is a built-in mechanism, ensuring successful adaptation to changing circumstances. In the earliest years skills and capacities are acquired in relationships with other people, through smiling and eye contact, talking and singing, modelling, imitation and simple games. These interactions help children learn about other people (Nelson et al., 2000).

Enabling children to access higher quality schools is a key motivator for many mothers to migrate. But the benefit may not always be greater than the potential blows to education that can result from a mother’s absence. Although school dropout may only happen in the most extreme cases, children charged with taking over responsibilities otherwise held by a migrant parent may find they have less time to focus on homework and other school assignments. Research from India shows, when a mother migrates, older children are likely to take on more household responsibility, often causing them to drop out of school (Gill, 2022). More time caring for siblings may also be linked to less social time with peers their age, a key factor in growth and development, especially in adolescence.

Early research from the Philippines suggests that maternal absence may disrupt education for children, as seen through lower school grades and poorer social adjustment (Battistella & Conaco, 1998). However, a more recent study highlighted that overall children in transnational families appeared to do better than children in non-migrant families. The “best” transnational arrangement appeared to be father-migrant and mother-as-caregiver, suggesting more information is needed on tradeoffs between the benefits of higher quality schools and pitfalls of children going through schooling in the context of international migration (Asis & Ruiz-Marave, 2013).

Improving education outcomes for left behind children is inextricably linked to boosting mental health factors, especially during key stages of childhood like adolescence. Similarly, healthy relationships with teachers who may be able to provide education and/or career guidance may be a key predictor of positive learning outcomes. However, constant contact with mothers who provide both emotional and academic support remains crucial, as well as support for alternative caregivers who may be tasked with supporting children academically.



Maizidah Salas is a leading voice for the rights of migrant workers in Indonesia. As a survivor of human trafficking and former MDW, Ms. Salas used her experience to establish the Village of Migrant Workers - an NGO that provides skills training and support to individuals and their families who migrate for economic opportunities. Ms. Salas and the SBMI team in Wonosobo observed lots of social problems in Tracap village, such as juvenile delinquency when mothers migrated to work overseas. To tackle parenting style challenges and low affection, they set up PAUD Ori School - a free school for MDW children, funded by the Village of Migrant Workers MART. To aid resocialisation, the school delivers fun learning activities that facilitate affection, community and relationship building.

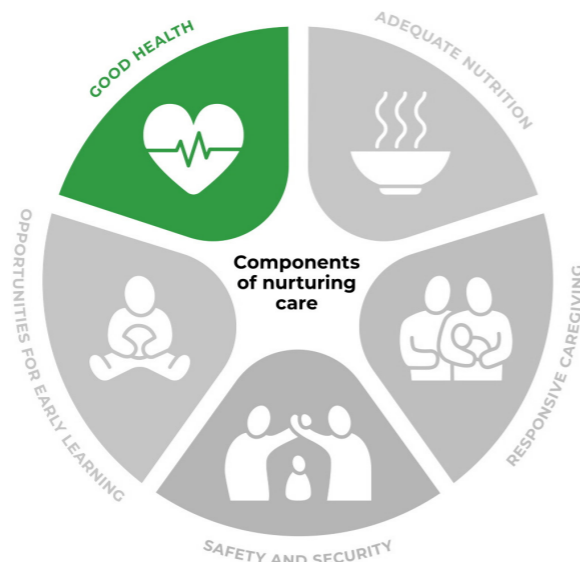
HEALTH

Understanding how maternal mental health impacts the ability to parent transnationally is crucial. If frequency and depth of conversations with mothers matters as discussed earlier, nonprofits, the government, and civil society must consider the potentially compounded nature of stress when mothers experience poor working conditions and difficulties adapting to life in HK (Bagley et al., 1997; van Santvoort, 2018).

In transnational households, across a range of geographic contexts, researchers found Indonesian children were more likely to experience internalising disorders (anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms) than those living with both parents. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, children left behind were less likely to exhibit externalising disorders (impulsive, disruptive conduct, substance use, and other addictive symptoms). Harmful health outcomes linked to social behaviours, such as tobacco and alcohol use, seem to be influenced more by peer than parental migration status.

Their research from Thailand finds a child's age at the time of their mothers migration influences mental health later in life: migration in early childhood is linked to poorer child mental health in middle childhood (Vanore et al., 2020). This points to the importance of alternate caregiving arrangements.

In a study conducted in China, researchers found negative impacts on children's health occurred primarily in the area of mental health. However, findings from low-income areas in India suggested money sent home by migrant parents somewhat balances the impact of their absence by contributing to better health outcomes. In situations of poverty, "the increased economic resources from remittances and the transmission of health knowledge may outweigh the negative impacts of reduced parental attention, resulting in a positive net impact of parental out-migration" (Lei & Desia, 2020). The intuition underlying this phenomenon is that parents who may otherwise not have access to certain health information are, for the first time, exposed to many people from other places with bodies of knowledge and expertise, that in turn builds their own base of knowledge.



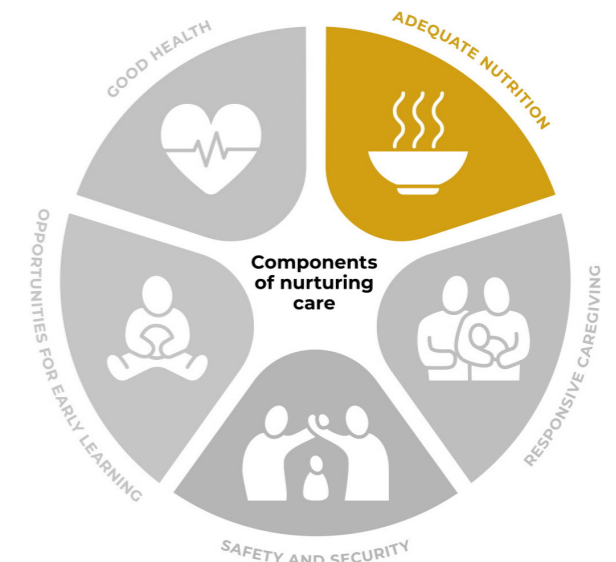
Watini's Story: My daughter Dewi Ratna is now 12 years old. I left her when she was 2.5 years old. Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God), my child is smart and diligent. I support her through phone calls - to encourage her to learn and offer comfort. When she misses me, she cries and asks when I will be home. I'd usually answer her, "It'll be very soon, as I'm earning money to buy snacks and for your education, child." She occupies herself by studying and drawing so she does not feel lonely. She only falls asleep when she is tired. Oftentimes she is not able to sleep. The doctor had to give her sleeping pills so she could sleep. I hope I can finish my contract this year. I want to return home and be with my child.

NUTRITION

Children need frequent meals and diverse foods to provide the micronutrients needed for rapid growth of their body and brain. When a child's daily diet fails to support healthy growth, micronutrient supplements or treatment for malnutrition is needed. Family food security and safety are essential for adequate nutrition (WHO, 2018).

Findings on the relationship between parental migration and nutrition are mixed. Some research suggests the impact from remittances leads to better nutrition due to access to more nutritious foods (Shi et al., 2020). While one school of thought points to the ability to afford higher quality food, another calls into question the child's ability to select for and attain the benefits of high-quality food.

In Bangladesh research found parental migration a significant protector for preventing stunting, wasting and underweight in children left behind. However, when controlled for possible confounders, there were no significant differences (Islam et al., 2019). Results from rural China also suggest parental migration is correlated with a reduction of the risk of stunting, wasting, and underweight children. However, in this setting,



children left behind were at much higher risk of anaemia (Shi et al., 2020).

Other research shows children left behind are more likely to be underweight than their peers, and points to the important role of mothers as caregivers (Wu & Guo, 2020). Anecdotal evidence collected by UNICEF from children in kinship care in Jalna, Maharashtra shows that children missed eating their favourite foods made by their mothers, and points to the fact that mothers may be more likely to suggest when and what to eat compared to other caregivers.



Farha Ciciek is one of Indonesia's leading Muslim feminists - a social justice and humanitarian activist who has tirelessly fought for women, children and elderly rights, as well as to develop and promote socially progressive and tolerant interpretations of Islam. In 2009, Ciciek moved to Ledokombo. Here she witnessed first-hand the many problems faced by children when parents left to work outside the village or abroad, including school dropouts, drug addiction, violence, early marriage and divorce, stunting and complicated health problems.

Together with several child and village activists, Ciciek established Tanoker (meaning 'cocoon'). At this learning and community centre for the children of migrant workers, their families, and marginalised communities, children learn to read and write, swim, play musical instruments, and practise traditional arts such as "stilt dancing". The children's achievements have inspired many different groups, communities and local governments to place even more attention on the creation of child-friendly environments. Once considered as underdeveloped, Ledokombo has been transformed by these children and their families into an area now known for educational tourism and creativity - full of hope. (www.tanoker.org)

POLICY GAPS & OPPORTUNITIES

Creating a world where all children matter will require identifying and addressing the needs of children of MDWs, across continents, contexts, and experiences. However, this issue has not been adequately addressed in conversations about the expansion of labour migration currently underway in the region.

Largely focusing on the socioeconomic gains of remittance incomes can obscure the significant human costs that also should be considered. The field of migration policy needs to further understand how to tailor support to children left behind in sending regions.

Destination region nonprofits, while supporting access to MDW labour rights, also become familiar with the constraints they face as mothers parenting transnationally while providing for their children overseas. As a result, they may also be uniquely positioned to support children who are left behind.

GLOBAL POLICIES

Global policies and agreements sometimes refer to the protection of MDW families when discussing the costs and needed areas of attention to economic migration. However, there is uneven mention about specific protections for children left behind.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child



The CRC identifies maintenance of the unity of the family as key to child protection and while encouraging, there remains a lack of concrete action backing such agreements, such as the ability for children to travel or visit with migrating members of the family (UNICEF, n.d.).

HK is a signatory of the CRC but the prevention of the accompaniment of dependents in the MDW labour migration scheme means their children must remain in their country of origin (Palmer & Tan, 2022).



Child Rights and Global Migration Compacts

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), developed by the UN, refers to top line commitments and objectives to comprehensively improve international migration. Destination Unknown's guide (2021) notes that in combination with the CRC, global compacts can be used to better understand needed steps for the augmented consideration of children left behind. Children left behind are broadly categorised as "children in the context of migration," and distinguished from children physically displaced by migration (such as victims of trafficking, disaster, or conflict).

REGIONAL POLICIES

Migration and related child protection risks are a significant concern in the ASEAN region and upholding the rights of children in the context of migration is part of the effort to achieve SDGs in the region.

The ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration includes and defines children left behind as children who remain in the origin country after a parent has migrated. It aims, through a Regional Action Plan, to promote and protect the rights of such children in accordance with the CRC. It comprises several focus areas such as policy development to increase child protection and access to resources, the development of civil society to better address children's needs, further child migration focused research, and the development of cross-sector partnerships to implement commitments and programming (Department of ASEAN Affairs, 2019).

COUNTRY POLICIES

There are grassroots examples of good practice in serving the needs of children affected by migration in sending countries like the Philippines and Indonesia (De Leon, 2022; Patinio, 2022.). However multi-sectoral government-led programming to safeguard children left behind is insufficiently institutionalised and often implementation of existing policies is under-resourced (Asis & Feranil, 2020).

Our desire is to further explore strategies and opportunities for collaboration - across both sending and destination countries - to support achievement of priority indicators of child well-being.



Indonesia

Announced by the Indonesian Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection in 2020, new guidelines recognised that women migrate for work and therefore need to have their rights protected, so their children's rights and well-being are concurrently protected. It emerged during Covid-19, and attempted to address some of the compound precarities migrant women faced, such as inability to visit home due to travel restrictions (European Union, 2020).

Desa Migran Produktif, (Desmigratif), Productive Migrant Village, formed in 2017, is a model for village-based services for migrant workers (Tinessia, 2019). It operates in conjunction with the Ministry of Manpower (Mindarti & Anggraeni, 2020). The majority of its residents live and work abroad and it has implemented community parenting systems, for example training for guardians, funding for education, and counselling options. It is being rolled out in 50 districts across Indonesia (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Similar models could be adopted by sending regions in order to better support and test solutions to support children left behind, their families, and communities.



Philippines

Government led policies, medical insurance and welfare assistance (such as scholarships to support higher education) provide some support to families to help them cope with the challenges of migration. However, their effectiveness has not been studied.

In July 2022 the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) formed the OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) Children's Circle aimed at protecting the welfare of children of migrant workers and to help OFW children to achieve their full potential in community-building. It includes activities such as social and creative skills development, civic mindedness for topics such as climate change, and encourages their contributions in policy-making (De Leon, 2022). In doing so, the program seeks to address the societal impact of labour migration, such as separation from an overseas parent, as well as negative effects on their well-being and mental health.

Research on the impact of migration notes that the reach of NGOs providing psychosocial support is limited and requires government backing, to be fully effective in protecting the rights and well-being of children left behind (Dominguez & Hall, 2022). It cites the need for further integrated partnerships and cross-sectoral programming to support families coping with the impact of migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-departure Preparedness

Provide comprehensive training in sending countries, tailored with destination country relevant information.

Typically, curriculum at employment agencies includes rudimentary housekeeping, cooking, labour regulations, and language and cultural training, and excludes forms of life-skills training. For all migrant women, pre-departure preparedness needs to include a focus on crisis prevention and migration goals, including duration, financial planning, and reproductive healthcare knowledge. For migrating mothers, training needs to also include additional emphasis on child guardianship, family togetherness and tips for transnational parenting.



On-arrival Support

Reinforce comprehensive training provided in Pre-departure Preparedness on arrival in the destination region.

For example, as part of a “welcome programme,” in addition to reflecting on and refining migration goals, nonprofits can signpost available MDW community and NGO services.

Information on general and reproductive health can be provided along with child safety, positive parenting, and other topics of importance to the migration and child safeguarding experience.

Community Education and Empowerment

Establish strong community networks in destination countries, supported by NGOs with education and empowerment programmes, to facilitate child development-orientated conversations.

For example, a support network of migrant mothers could come together to co-create a “curriculum” of child development topics, while supporting increased and improved quality of communication with children and family in countries of origin.



MDW/Employer Relations

Develop employer awareness of MDWs as mothers to increase empathy and ensure they provide structural conditions to facilitate more effective transnational parenting.

A key example is sufficient breaks and access to their mobile phones, so conversations between mother and child are possible. Broaden the understanding of an employer’s own child/ren’s relationship with their MDW and the emotional bonds of reliance and kinship that develop across traditional familial relationships.

Research Agenda

Conduct further research to understand and more clearly establish the link and potential impact of migration on child protection, health and development, specifically including origin and destination countries.

Generate more information about specific contextual factors in Indonesia and the Philippines as sending countries, and HK as a destination region, to create cross-national interventions - including civil society and government partnerships - that are well-suited to these contexts.

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