Parental migration and the children left behind

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Recent research shows that children who remain behind when their parents leave their countries of origin are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other emotional and mental health problems. Children are particularly affected when their mothers leave. Some studies also indicate that children from transnational families are more likely than their peers to exhibit behavioral problems. Such issues are more prevalent among boys, while girls are more likely to experience emotional problems.

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My colleague Friedhelm Pfeiffer and I recently conducted a study to learn more about the causal effects of parental migration on the mental health of the children who are left behind. Using data from Romania, the EU country that has experienced the greatest increase in emigration over the past few decades, we show that for children left behind, parental migration is linked to an increase in serious health problems and a greater likelihood of depression, relative to children living in non-migrant households. Our results also reveal that living in a transnational family is particularly harmful for girls and for children from rural areas.

When I presented the results of our study to students at our local university in Romania, I was unaware until these students shared their experiences that some of them, too, had been left behind by parents seeking work abroad. They also pointed out something that our research had not considered: Another factor with a negative impact on their well-being was the psychological stress experienced by their caregivers, who were often overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for these children.

This confirms the findings of other studies, which show that these children’s mental health issues are associated not only with their parents’ migration, but also with the mental health and overall life satisfaction of their current caregivers.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the children who are left behind by migrant workers may suffer long-lasting consequences.

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