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Transnational families in urban areas of Ethiopia: understanding the lived experiences of children left behind

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ABSTRACT

Despite a huge flow of international labor migration, sub-Saharan Africa has not been given due consideration in the transnational families literature. There is a considerable flow of international labor migration from Ethiopia to economically prosperous countries. This study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences and life tapestry of children left-behind by one or both parents in Addis Ababa and Adama City, Ethiopia. The study was informed by the "new social studies of childhood" theory, which considers children as active in constructing their lives and those around them. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 children who experienced parental migration. The findings revealed that parental migration has many significant effects in shaping and permeating children's lives and identities—their emotions, education, and living arrangements. Despite children's spatio-temporal separation, smartphones were found to play a prominent role in fostering parent-child relationships. Parental migration affected children's aspirations, specifically to be reunited with their migrant parent(s). This study contributes by expanding our understanding of children left-behind in Ethiopia and identifies social work services that need attention. In the existing policies related to children in Ethiopia, children left-behind must be considered as a segment of the population that requires earnest attention.

KEY TERMS: *Children left behind; Ethiopia; international labor migration; lived experiences; parental migration; transnational families.*

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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is among the leading labor-sending countries in Africa. There has been a recent unprecedented surge in the number of international labor migrants from Ethiopia. The migration of parents creates transnational families, in which families are dispersed across geographical distances. Parents leave their children behind due to greater labor market opportunities in advanced states, which suggests an urgent need to understand the implications for the children left behind. The current study explored how parental migration shapes and permeates children's lives and identities. A qualitative approach was used to allow children to express their lived experiences. This paper begins with background to provide context, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

BACKGROUND

In Africa, sizeable numbers of foreign migrants move both within and outside the continent. The number of Africans living in various regions has increased from approximately 17 million in 2015 to over 19.5 million in 2020. In 2020, most African-born migrants living outside the region resided in Europe (11 million), Asia (nearly 5 million), and Northern America (approximately 3 million) (IOM, 2021). Ethiopia is a major source of international labor migration in Africa, with unemployment, poverty, and political persecution the major contributory factors to the outward migration (ILO, 2023). The most prominent migration route is to the Middle East, followed by Africa, Europe, and North America. South Africa is a popular destination for Ethiopian migrants, both as a place to settle and as a transit country in migrating to the North (Kuschminder et al., 2018).

While several studies have identified that remittances parents send have a beneficial effect on children's education (Intemann & Katz, 2014), children left-behind display lower educational attendance and performance due to such factors as more household chores and inadequate help from caregivers (Tawodzera & Themane, 2019). Children also experience poorer emotional well-being, for example greater levels of depression, feelings of abandonment, loneliness, fear, and sadness (Filippa, 2013; Kufakurinani et al., 2014). Children left-behind may lack academic motivation due to psychological and social problems (Getnet & Abebaw, 2022; Jaure & Gregory, 2022). Research reports that children who move between caregivers show poorer psychological well-being than children who remain with the same caregiver (Cebotari et al., 2018; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016). Children of migrant mothers performed poorer academically than children of migrant fathers (Dununsinghe, 2021). Parental migration changes household structure, resulting in diverse households, for example, grandparent-headed households and transnational families. The eldest child, often the daughter, becomes their siblings' pseudo-parent (Buthelezi, 2022). In transnational families of migrant mothers, eldest daughters are most likely burdened with housework and care work, with a negative effect on their educational performance (Makondo, 2022).

Research indicates that fathers, both as migrants and as the remaining parent, rarely assume the role of nurturing their children and rather, assign the responsibility to extended female family members (Saleh, 2021; Seepamore, 2016). Mobile phones play an indispensable role in migrant parents' communication with their children (Meyers & Rugnanan, 2020; Girmachew, 2018), with evidence that migrant mothers make greater use of communication technologies than migrant fathers to nurture their children (Parreñas, 2014). Moreover, migrant parent(s) provide emotional care from afar through regular phone calls and return visits (Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014).

Despite a tremendous flow of international labor migration from sub-Saharan Africa, documentation of trends in international labor migration is sparse (Kusi-Mensah & Omigbodun, 2022). Specifically, Ethiopia is not given due consideration in the transnational family literature. Moreover, the existing literature focuses on children through the prism of their parents and rarely through children's perspectives (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Children's perspectives on their experiences of information and communication technology (ICT) based relations with their migrant parent(s) are also lacking (Osei et al., 2023). It is important to obtain children's perspectives and to conduct country-specific studies to determine the benefits and challenges for the children left-behind. Such research can help identify both common and unique findings and inform strategies to promote the well-being of children left-behind and their families.

The aim of the current study was to understand the impact of parental migration on children left behind in Ethiopia from the children's perspectives. The impetus for the study was the alarming increase in international labor migration and the primary researcher's childhood experiences. Areas explored included participants' emotional responses, educational impacts, shifts in living arrangements, the role of technology, and hopes regarding living with parents.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The current study was informed by the new social studies of childhood theory. The "new social studies of childhood" emerged in the 1980s-1990s as a radical view of childhood based on critiques of the reductionism of childhood to incompetency, as well as the view that the Western model is the global ideal of childhood (Ofosu-Kusi, 2020). Children were seen as natural and universal, with the division between adults and children marked

as 'human beings' and 'human becoming' (Norozi & Moen, 2016, p. 78). Children's voices were not considered in the research process, as adults in their lives spoke for the children. The new social studies of childhood theory, however, provides the ideological underpinning for the child-centered paradigm of childhood, which deconstructs childhood from universal notions to social and cultural childhoods. This paradigm understands childhood as socially constructed and highlights the view of children. It foregrounds the child as fully participating and as not to be objectified in the process of socialization (Ofosu-Kusi, 2020). Investigating phenomena from the child participants' perspectives and listening to children tell their experiences of being left-behind is necessary. Children should be considered actively involved in their lives and are worthy of study in and of themselves.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive qualitative research approach, which provides rich descriptive content from the participants' perspectives, was used to explore the lived experiences of children left behind. This approach allows researchers to choose from various theoretical approaches, sampling techniques, and data collection strategies (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). In the current study, 25 participants (17 females, 8 males) who experienced parental migration, participated in individual interviews between June and December 2023 in Adama and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Participants were between 12 and 18 years. The inclusion criteria comprised children experiencing parental migration for a minimum of one year at the time of the study.

We identified the participants at primary and secondary schools with the cooperation of school principals. Before the interview, we gained participants' assent and caregivers' consent. We explained the aim and contribution of the study and informed them about their right to withdraw at any time. We offered participants the opportunity to select interview locations and obtained consent to audio-record interviews. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. Ethical clearance was obtained from the School of Social Work, Addis Ababa University.

This study was conducted in Addis Ababa and Adama, where a significant number of children lived without one or both parents. The interviews in Adama and Addis Ababa were conducted in local languages *Afaan Oromo* and *Amharic*, respectively (Chigevenga, 2022). Each language is well-known to the participants and common in the areas. Interviews lasted approximately 20 to 45 minutes and were transcribed and translated from Afaan Oromo and Amharic to English. After completion of transcription and translation, we began analysis by manually combining and synthesizing the data into themes. We classified the data according to the type of information, and we brought similar stories together. Five interacting and overlapping themes were revealed: emotional responses to parental absence; impact on education; shift in living arrangements; role of technology; and hopes regarding living with parents.

RESULTS

Emotional responses to parental absence

Although the participants believed that parental migration improved their lives in some ways, they described experiencing serious emotional consequences. Participants found it especially challenging when they saw their friends spending time with their own parents. Zebiba (14, girl) said, "*While seeing my friends spending happy moments with their mothers, I felt like I had missed something. Life is better with one's parents despite poverty."* Some participants reported having mixed feelings due to their parent(s)' absence. While feeling they lost the love and care of their parent(s), they believed they benefited from the financial support. Participants depicted life before their parent(s)' migration as unenviable and difficult. Aziz (18, boy) and Temam (18, boy) explained that their mothers could not meet the family's basic needs before migrating. There were participants who felt they received remittances from their migrant parents at the cost of love and affection. As having family abroad can be considered a sign of wealth and prestige, participants' social status increased among their friendship circles. For instance, Temam (18, boy) relayed, "*My friends and neighbors expressed to me that I would be wealthy in the future because of my mother's travel."*

Some participants focused on the emotions of their migrant parent(s), rather than their own. Firtuna (18, girl) stated, "*I was thinking of my mother because she lost her children's love. My mother feels lonely when I do not call her. Sometimes, she cries. I advise her not to cry and to remain strong."* Participants found it painful due to comments made by friends and neighbors, such as reminders that their parent was absent. A girl (Rahel, 12) said her friends often asked, "*Why is your father not coming? Has he married another woman*?" Similarly, Hayat (17, girl) said others often asked questions such as, "*Why did she leave you?"*

Although all participants were eager to live with both parents, if they had to choose one parent having to migrate, they preferred their mother stay with them. Participants whose fathers migrated while their mothers did not, described their remaining family as a "nuclear" family, despite their father's absence. The female participants reasoned that their mothers prepared them not only for kitchen work, but also about socializing regarding gender roles and expectations. Marina (16, girl) explained that her mother, "*stays at home and teaches me everything that a woman or girl would do. It is the mother who shapes daughters into kitchen work."* Habiba (17, girl) asserted,

"*After my mother left, the younger siblings did not listen to their elder siblings. My father does not manage this because he is busy with many duties outside the home."*

Impact on education

After parental migration, role reversal in the household became imminent. Elder siblings often served as caretakers for their younger siblings. Nafkot (16, girl) expressed that her education suffered accordingly:

> *I am responsible for managing all responsibilities at home. I manage the money sent by my parents and regularly buy household items. I was ranked 10 out of 40 students. This was attributed to the responsibility I assumed, which made me very busy.*

Children whose parents migrated to Europe or the United States stated that they were not interested in pursuing education in Ethiopia, as they hoped to join their parents abroad. Mengistu (14, boy) said, "*I lost focus on my education. My dream is to go to the USA*." Participants consistently reported doing less well in school due to a lack of support and supervision by caregivers. Dagim (17, boy), whose mother traveled to Saudi Arabia nine years earlier and was under the care of his grandmother and uncle, relayed, "*there was no supervision of my education. My uncle because he leaves home in the morning and arrives late at night. He does not speak to me."* Some participants noted that parental migration did not affect their education. Temam (18, boy) was consistently among the top three students in his class before and after his mother migrated. Similarly, despite both her parents having migrated, Zahra (14, girl) remained among the top students in her class. She had no sense of her parents because they left in her early years. She stated, "I could not understand the impact of my parents' absence on my educational achievement."

Parental migration positively affected the educational performance of some of the children left behind. Participants identified remittances, gifts, and paid tutors as helping them perform better academically. Remittance allowed the purchase of items such as books and ensured that the children did not go hungry. For example, Aziz (18, boy) said that before his mother migrated, he and his sibling "had one school uniform," whereas, after she left, they had three. Children left-behind received gifts such as laptop computers, which helped with their schoolwork. Migrant parent(s) at times hired a tutor to help children left behind. Marina (16, girl) reported that she was the best student in her class, which she attributed to the tutor employed by her father.

Shifts in living arrangements

Several participants described having no or little sense of their parent(s). For example, Zalika (17, girl), who was happy with her grandparents, explained, "*I have no sense of my mother. I do not remember life with my mother. I am happy with the life I have. I feel my mother might not give me care and love like my grandparents."* Similarly, Zahra (14, girl) expressed, "*My mother left when I was four. I had not lived with her. I feel like I have not lost anything."* Some participants described moving across several households and caregivers, and schools. After her mother migrated to Bahrain, Firtuna (18, girl) lived with her mother's friend, who Firtuna said "abused" her, in addition to making her care for the woman's child: "*By the time I was nine, I did not even know how to take care of a kid […] I always felt starved. I ate bread that lasted for a week or more."* Firtuna added, "*When I spoke to my mother, my mother's friend listened to me. She did not want to hear the complaints I would present to my mother."* When she visited her aunt, who lived nearby, her mother's friend beat Firtuna. At a school ceremony, Firtuna was able to meet her aunt and tell her about her situation, after which her aunt arranged for Firtuna to live with her father in another city. Firtuna completed her education while living with her father, which went well.

Hayat (17, girl) similarly described moving from household to household. For some time after her mother migrated, she lived with her aunt, a home in which there were several children. Following her grandmother's return from Saudi Arabia, Hayat's mother, who remained in Saudi Arabia, insisted that Hayat live with her grandmother, explaining that her grandmother was lonely. Happy at her aunt's, however, Hayat was, "*unhappy when my mother requested me to live with my grandmother. Also, my aunt and cousins were not happy with my leaving. We all cried."* Hayat found it "unbearable"; "*it was hard for me to adjust to living with my grandmother, and I was feeling distressed for some time. I missed playing with my cousins at night."*

Role of technology in parent-child relationships

The overwhelming majority of participants had access to smartphones. In addition to other gifts, the migrant parent(s) often sent their children smartphones, IPADs, and laptop computers, which allowed the participants to connect with and receive emotional support from their migrant parent(s). Participants use various forms of social media to communicate with their migrant parent(s). The duration and frequency of communication varied according to the migrant parent(s)' gender. When speaking with their mothers, participants said they often spoke for more than one hour. Girls especially talked about spending more time communicating with their migrant mothers. Communication with fathers was described as typically brief. According to Nafkot (16, girl), "*Most of the time, communication with my mother lasts between 30 minutes and an hour. However, the communication with my father is erratic, and the duration is not more than 10 minutes."* Further, participants felt comfortable

speaking with their mothers. Bedriya (14, girl) expressed being excited while speaking with her mother, "I remember the good old days. She used to kiss my forehead whenever I came from school." According to participants, during technology-mediated communication, their mothers often cried and showed strong emotions of love and care. Dagim (17, boy) communicated with his mother three times per week and explained that she cried whenever they spoke. Bilisuma (17, girl) said her mother phoned twice daily to check whether she and her siblings were ready for school and to make sure they had dinner and were ready for bed. Bilisuma said:

> *Sometimes we show our mother in a video what we are doing in the room. We show her when we dine together. When she sees this, my mother said, 'I can't eat a meal properly when you are not with me,' and that makes us discomfited. However, she is happy when she sees us dining together.*

Some participants served as connectors for their mothers and grandmothers if they were illiterate and did not know how to use smartphones. For instance, Dagim's (17, boy) mother communicated with his grandmother via his phone.

Hopes regarding living with parent(s)

The participants' narratives indicated that many wanted and hoped to be reunited with their migrant parents. Most participants did not wish to move to the Gulf States because of the poor treatment of Ethiopian domestic workers, and rather, wanted their parent(s) to return to Ethiopia. They wanted to pursue their education in Ethiopia and aspired to become doctors, lawyers, and artists. For example, Firtuna (18, girl) stated, "*I am not ready to go to Arab countries to work. I want to pursue education and become successful in Ethiopia."* Neither Firtuna nor her sister Zalika (17) had seen their mother for over a decade, as she was an undocumented worker in Bahrain and unable to visit her children. The sisters hoped that their mother would return one day so they could live together.

In contrast, participants whose parents migrated to the USA or Europe wished to join their parent(s) in these countries. Despite their parents' advice to concentrate on school, participants found it difficult to do so because of their wish to join their parents abroad. Two exceptions were Hayat (17, girl) and Nafkot (16, girl), who wanted to migrate to the Gulf States. For example, Hayat (17, girl) wanted to travel to one of the Gulf States to support her mother and grandmother, as she believed they needed to rest.

DISCUSSION

In this study, which is unique in exploring the perspectives of children-left behind due to parental migration, the participants described detrimental effects on their emotional well-being. Concurrently, participants felt grateful for the remittance their parents sent them, which provided essentials. The migration of parent(s) emerged as having a mixed effect on children's school performance. On the one hand, factors such as familial role reversals, emotional preoccupation, and lack of supervision and support emerged as negatively affecting the participants' educational performance. On the other hand, parental remittances, gifts, and paid tutors facilitated participants' school achievement and that of their siblings. Some participants reported that parental migration had no effect on their educational performance. With parental migration came significant shifts in caregivers, which appeared to often have a harmful impact on the participants' emotional well-being and education. Smartphones and social media applications greatly enhanced the connection between migrant parents and the children left behind. Many of the participants wished to be reunited with their parent(s) in Ethiopia or abroad.

The participants expressed benefiting from the remittances sent by parents and stated that they did not lack financial support. They described feeling sad, however, especially when they see friends with their parents at school and in their communities. This is consistent with Filippa (2013) and Kufakurinani et al. (2014), who indicated that children experienced feelings of abandonment, stress, fear, anger, and sadness when their parents were absent. A unique finding of the current study is that some participants focused on providing emotional support to their migrant parent(s), wanting to support their parent(s) to persevere and remain strong despite the adversities abroad. Another unique finding in the current study is that, according to the participants, the community sometimes exacerbated the emotional challenges of children left behind, by reminding them that their parents had left them. On the other hand, after parental migration, the participants found that their social status increased in their friendship circle, as they were considered "wealthy".

Although all participants were eager to live with both parents, the participants whose fathers migrated while their mothers remained with the children found that the remaining family felt positive. This finding is consistent with Parreñas (2014), who concluded that a nuclear family remains intact despite the father's absence. In the current study, the participants, especially girls, preferred that their father be the parent to have to migrate.

Consistent with Intemann and Katz (2014), who revealed the beneficial effect of parental migration on children's education, the current study findings suggest that parental migration sometimes facilitated children's education, with remittances, gifts, and paid tutors playing a pivotal role. Concurrently, parental migration was found to decrease children's school performance due to household role reversals, emotional preoccupation, and lack of guidance and support. Such results are in accord with Getnet and Abebaw (2022) and Jaure and Gregory (2022), who found that children of migrant parent(s) performed less well academically due to the absence of

parental guidance and the associated negative psychological and behavioral effects. Like the current study, Dununsinghe (2021) found that children of migrant mothers performed less well academically than children of migrant fathers, whereas other research found that parental migration is more beneficial for girls' educational attainment than for boys (Kuepie, 2018). In the current study, elder girls performed less well than boys academically in part because of the surrogate parent role they played.

Parental migration, especially maternal migration, was clearly associated with significant shifts in household role reversals. Extended female family members and in some cases older siblings, typically care for the children left behind. This finding supports research by Saleh (2021) and Seepamore (2016), who indicated that fathers left-behind seldom assume the role of nurturing their children and rather, delegate the responsibility to elder daughters and extended female family members. Consistent with previous findings (Cebotari et al., 2018; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016) that children who frequently change caregivers show poorer psychological well-being than children who remain with the same caregiver, the current study found that children left-behind were faced with emotional challenges due to having to move to other caregivers and schools.

Meyers and Rugnanan (2020), Girmachew (2018), reported that mobile phones play an indispensable role in migrant parents' parenting and that children own more smartphones due to remittance. In the current study, smart phones and various social media applications were similarly found to be vital in facilitating communication with migrant parents. Current findings indicate that the participants communicate more frequently and for longer periods of time with their mothers than fathers. This is congruent with Parreñas (2014), who found that migrant mothers make greater use of communication technology to nurture their children than do migrant fathers.

Parental migration was revealed to significantly shape and permeate all aspects of the lives and identities of children left behind, including emotions, education, and living arrangements. The participants expressed mixed feelings and responses following their parent(s)' migration and reported both benefits and challenges. One benefit is that due to their parental migration, peers considered the children left-behind to be "wealthy/rich", which enhanced their status and their peers' respect for them. Findings indicated that there were variable and inconsistent effects on the children's academic performance due to their parent(s)' migration. In some cases, their parent(s)' migration was beneficial to the children left-behind whereas in others, the children experienced greater difficulties and challenges. Moreover, some participants explained that their parent(s)' migration had no effect on their academic functioning. With parental migration, especially mothers, came significant shifts in household roles and at times frequent changes in caregivers. Older children were responsible for caring for their younger siblings, which they believed affected their educational performance. Smartphones owned by children play a pivotal role in enhancing parent-child relationships. Parental migration also affected participants' dreams and aspirations, specifically the desire to be reunited with parents. Unlike previous frameworks in which children were considered 'human becoming' whereas adults were seen as 'human beings', participants fit the view of children as having inherent capacity to change and shape their lives and those around them. Interventions with children left-behind must begin with assessing their strengths and challenges, to help them address their predicament. The current findings can inform policy makers and practitioners in understanding and addressing the situations of children left-behind in Ethiopia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The study findings suggest that parental absence can negatively affect children's emotional well-being and education. Thus, it is urgent that social work practitioners implement strategies and interventions to help children cope with their parental absence and the consequent circumstances. Psychosocial support and counseling are needed to address issues such as education, relationship connections and attachments. One implication is that caregivers of children left-behind require training, education, and ongoing support in caring for these children. It is critical that the children not be portrayed as passive victims of parental absence; rather, they must be recognized as young people with the capacity to shape their lives and that of their siblings, and migrant parent(s). Social workers are well positioned to provide support and build on children's strengths and resilience.

As there is no policy framework that protects the needs of children left-behind in Ethiopia, it is critical that policymakers pay attention to this unseen segment of society. There is a need for further research, including longitudinal studies, to ascertain the long-term effects of parental migration on children left-behind in Ethiopia. A comparative analysis with children of non-migrant parents might provide a greater understanding of the lived experiences of children left-behind in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSION

The current study is unique in obtaining and exploring the perspectives of the children left-behind when their parent(s) migrate to improve their economic situation. The participants' narratives illuminated how parental migration shaped and permeated their lives and identities including their emotions, education, and living arrangements. Mixed effects of parental absence on children's emotional well-being and educational performance were observed. According to the current study, children left-behind are not only recipients of love and care from their migrant parent(s), but also worry about and provide emotional support for their migrant

parent(s). The community emerged as being both beneficial and hurtful. Repetitive questions and comments about their migrant parent(s) were described as exacerbating the emotional challenges of children left behind. On the other hand, having migrant parent(s) abroad was characterized as improving the status and peer respect of children left behind. Children experienced significant and repeated shifts in their living arrangements, with most being cared for by extended female family members. Having to leave familiar caregivers for new situations and caregivers affected the emotional well-being and education of children left behind. Communication technology especially smartphones, was highly instrumental in helping children left-behind communicate with their migrant parent(s) notably more regularly than previously. Most participants described this regular contact as positive - loving and comforting. A few participants who were closely bonded with their caregivers and others in the home situation found their migrant parent(s)' efforts for regular contact difficult. Parental migration affects children's dreams and aspirations, with many focusing their hope on living with their migrant parent(s).

DECLARATIONS

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