Transnational, Multi-local Motherhood: Experiences of Separation and Reunification among Latin American Families in Canada

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Issue
Migration, Separation and Reunification in Transnational Families

Introduction
Researchers and policymakers often think of migrants as people who uproot themselves from one country and begin the stages of integration into another country and they tend to assume that families migrate together as intact units. Where families have not started out intact, reunification is assumed. However, the intact family model is not always the norm. Families who are spread over nation states and whose lives cross national boundaries are known in the social science literature respectively as “multi-local” and “transnational” families.

The Latin American Research Group (LARG) study asked several related research questions, including:

1. What constitutes a transnational family?
2. What are the implications and impacts of transnational families, especially on children, both before and after migration and reunification?
3. What are the pressures on and changes in the role of the mother in the transnational family?
4. How does parental authority change during the migration and reunification process and what are the effects on the children?
5. Are transnational mothers aware of social services? How do they access and experience these services?

How the Study was Conducted
First-language Spanish speakers conducted 40 one-on-one interviews (open and closed questions) with women who had been separated from their children.

SUMMARY
The study explores the experiences of Latin American families who have faced separation and reunification during their migration process to Canada. Forty mothers who had been separated from their children were interviewed in an effort to understand how mother-child relationships and family networks are transformed by transnational, multi-local family structures. Transnational, multi-local families are increasingly common and will continue to be a feature of Canadian society. The report identifies the barriers to the mothers’ utilization of social services and concludes that the specific needs of transnational families must be recognized. The study offers policy and practical recommendations for policymakers, service providers and for families.

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POLICY MATTERS is a series of reports focusing on key policy issues affecting immigration and settlement in Canada. The goal is to provide accessible, concise information on current immigration research and its implications for policy development. POLICY MATTERS is produced by the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement – Toronto (CERIS).
been in Canada for at least one year, had been the children’s primary caregiver until migration and had experienced separation from their children due to the migration process. The participants were located through a snowball referral process from immigrant-serving organizations and churches. The participants do not constitute a random sample. The 40 women (and their families) came from six countries: Colombia (10), Costa Rica (6), Guatemala (5), El Salvador (7), Ecuador (6), and Mexico (6).

The Mothers

While the sample was small and heterogeneous, the study found trends in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the participants. Some striking findings in the sample characteristics include the new streams of immigrant sending countries, such as Costa Rica and Mexico, the multiple ways of entry, and the fact that 15 of the 40 participants cited domestic violence as a reason for leaving their countries.

Children’s ages at separation ranged from 4 months to 11 years. Fifteen of the children were under the age of 1, twenty-one were under the age of 6 and four of the children were between 7 and 11 years old. – Authors

...one-third of the sample said they were escaping domestic violence. Others came to Canada from situations of underlying political violence, crime and public insecurity. – Authors

Age:

The women’s ages upon arrival in Canada ranged from 19 to 45 years with a mean of 32.4 years. At the time of the interviews, fourteen women were between 25 and 34 years of age, twenty were 35-45 and 6 were over 45 years old.

Migration History:

Most women left their countries from a context of social exclusion and limited economic opportunities. This decision often dovetailed with crises in their lives. When asked about their reasons for migrating we were deeply affected by finding that one third of the sample said they were escaping domestic violence. Others came to Canada from situations of underlying political violence, crime and public insecurity. A small number cited economic difficulties as the main reason for migrating. The decision to migrate was often made in consultation with extended family members.

Entry to Canada & Immigration Status:

This group of women used a variety of methods of entry to Canada in contrast to, for instance, Filipino and West Indian transnational mothers who have a long history of migration to Canada under the domestic live-in caregiver program.

Twelve women who had already spent time in Canada entered as permanent residents. About one-third came as refugee claimants. Three came because their spouses were already in Canada. The rest were sponsored or came as tourists and students. There were no mothers in our sample who came because they were offered employment in Canada.

Educational/Professional Qualifications:

The participants’ educational backgrounds were heterogeneous. Four had little or no education, nineteen had secondary or vocational school credentials, and seventeen had post-secondary education. Most participants were performing cleaning jobs or were unwilling welfare recipients.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Transnational, multi-local families are increasingly common and will continue to be a feature of Canadian society. In the face of multiple pressures to migrate, family separation is a viable strategy for many, although it comes at a tremendous human cost to families, mothers and children.

Implications and Impacts on Children

Typically, the mothers made efforts to maintain frequent contact with the children and their caregivers via telephone, letters,
travel, the Internet and the sending of gifts and money.

The mothers’ feelings ranged from anger and guilt to depression and hopelessness.

Children also suffered emotionally, became distant from their mothers and angry or aggressive. Estrangement often resulted after especially long separations.

**Pressure on and Changes in the Role of Mothers**

Mothers faced many obstacles and bore extreme stress. In a few cases, women relinquished their caregiving roles by sending the children back to be cared for by relatives.

Financial issues, unclear or no legal status, lack of access to childcare services, and language limitations made their caregiving functions extremely difficult.

…I sometimes feel guilty and ask myself if it was all worth it, if it was really worth it to come here leaving three children behind, or is it that only money is important. Or is it only important to be here? And what about human values and respect? What is the place of family then? These are questions that I ask myself all the time. (Case 15)

I ideological representations of “good mothering” (where all the responsibility for children is viewed as belonging to/sitting with the mothers) created insurmountable barriers for the women given that they could not even consider alternate childcare arrangements such as formal daycare or other types of social support.

**Change of Authority in Transnational, Multi-local Families**

While separated, decisions about the children were either taken by grandparents, fathers, or other relatives remaining in the home countries. In some cases, there was no proper uptake of parental authority.

In some cases, the effect on the children was such that they no longer considered the mothers as authority figures.

In other cases, the children parented themselves, with varying levels of success.

In still other cases, the mothers felt pressured to relinquish their rights as primary caregivers and were reluctant to voice discomfort during times of disagreement.

**Mothers’ Experiences with Social Services**

Findings indicate that there was no consistent use of available social services. Working mothers often lacked sufficient social support, regardless of their legal status.

Mothers with less-than-full status who did not have access to programs or services, such as childcare, feared being reported if they attempted to access services. Social service providers were unaware, unsympathetic, or ill-equipped to work with transnational, multi-local families.

My emotions were terrible for me. A lot of depression, crying, and sadness. I worked a lot. I worked a great deal. I would come home and cry alone, calling out for my son. I would see children in the street, and I didn’t know how he was. I knew he was growing. It started to weigh more on me as time passed. The only thing that helped was going to church. There, there were a lot of families in the same situation, and we supported each other, and told each other to be patient. (Case 29)

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the face of the present data and the complexity of problems they represent, the study calls on policymakers and service providers to work towards understanding and remedying the issues related to transnational, multi-local families. Readers are encouraged to review the selected references identified at the end of this paper for further information.

To facilitate prompt and effective reunification of transnational, multi-local families, the study offers a series of recommendations for policymakers, service providers, and families, and communities.

**Recommendations for Policymakers**

**Policy Development**

With respect to overall policy
development, policymakers must address two major issues:

1) Respond to concerns expressed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child with respect to the harm caused by delays in family reunification, as recommended by the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR).

2) Make the family reunification process more efficient and affordable.

**Training**

Training for front-line and social service workers should include awareness of the general as well as the specific individual needs of immigrant children, parents and families. That is, workers should have a good understanding of the issues related to the processes of migration and reunification in general, but should keep in mind that each individual’s experiences of them will vary.

What happened is that when we got to Canada, we didn’t have government help for daycare, and so it was too expensive for us to pay $225 a week for them to take care of him while I took English classes... It was impossible for me to study and have someone else care for the child. (Case 9)

**Funding**

In terms of funding, policymakers need to:

1) Designate funding for immigrant-serving organizations and service providers to work with mothers and families who have been separated from their children.

2) Provide fee-subsidies for childcare and after-school programs for newly arrived migrant children, regardless of status.

**Services and Supports**

In the area of services and supports a number of progressive steps can be taken, for example:

1) Expand the capacity of organizations to provide services and supports to families with young children, by including places of worship in service-delivery discussions.

2) Ensure home-visiting programs are focused on the needs of immigrant children and support transnational and multi-local families in their reunification with their children.

3) Expand medical and education coverage to all children regardless of immigrant status and provide linguistically and culturally appropriate services to ensure children can benefit.

4) Extend the scope and outreach of programs, such as the Settlement Workers in the Schools program, and fund them adequately.

**Innovation**

In order to foster greater innovation the following steps should be initiated:

1) Develop new programs based on those that have been run successfully.

2) Amend immigration policies and practices with a view to eliminating barriers to parent-child reunification and reducing processing delays that prolong family separation.

3) Consider setting up qualification criteria which would enable poor working families to access social supports.

4) Set up liaisons with places of worship and community organizations that provide social services, and urge them to review eligibility requirements for material support to ensure they do not screen out transnational, multi-local mothers.

I didn’t want to leave my son with just anyone if I went to work. I didn’t qualify for daycare because at that time I didn’t have my papers. I wasn’t a student anymore, I was doing the paperwork, but didn’t have anything yet. I would say to myself, “I’ll leave the baby with someone to look after him.” But since I heard about so many cases of mistreatment and abuse, it wasn’t easy for me. (Case 29)

**Recommendations for Service Providers**

**Information Sharing**

Access to information is critical for individuals, families and institutions dealing with experiences of child separation and reunification. To enhance
information sharing, three concrete actions can be followed by service providers:

1) Develop, share, and distribute an inventory of services, supports, and programs in the languages spoken by transnational, multi-local families in your community.

2) Organize regular group sessions for multi-local families to come together for information, support, and social occasions, including parent education.

3) Recognize that for many families, seeking assistance may be stigmatizing. Develop outreach programs that address this barrier.

They [the children] would act strange, they did not want to eat, and they said they wanted me to cook the way their grandmother did. I let them say all kinds of things to me so that I could win them over. They always slept in the same room, the two of them, and they are still like that. They don’t get along with my oldest daughter. They said I loved her more because I brought her, and they said I was bad. (Case 3)

Working with Families

A number of steps can be taken by service providers to increase their abilities to work with families more productively, namely:

1) Support in-service professional development for staff to prepare them to work confidently and effectively with transnational, multi-local families.

2) Direct- or front-line service providers should learn the larger family configuration and consider that they may be dealing with an unstable situation. Learn which parents or children are not in Canada and the timelines regarding separation and reunification.

3) Find out how the families feel about the transnational situation. Consider the issue of a mother blaming herself, and that there may be pressure on her to send her children back to their country of origin.

4) Learn the lines of family authority and do not assume they are in Canada. Do not assume that the children and parent in Canada exchange important information.

5) Consider the economics of the transnational family. Do not assume the financial situation is “workable”.

6) Help families access services. For example, set up/arrange counselling for women who were abused or who were victims of violence in the past because of spousal violence, or violence experienced during migration.

7) Acknowledge that service needs do not vanish upon reunification, especially where there has been extended separation. Consider whether the newly arrived children are under stress, unhappy, alienated, and/or depressed.

8) Encourage children to continue to develop skills in their home language so that ongoing dialogue with their families remains a possibility.

Recommendations for Families

Parenting Matters

Parents can enhance their mental health & well-being and improve their connections with their separated children by taking the following actions:

1) Maintain frequent contact and keep open lines of communication with your child’s caregiver.

2) Do not give up your rights as a parent. Decisions regarding health, education, discipline and caregiving are and remain yours.

3) Talk to other women in your community (and other communities) who are living in similar situations. Learn from their experiences and act collectively when possible.

4) Be good to yourself and to women in similar situations. Take extra care of yourself during the period of separation and reunification.

5) Do not be afraid of seeking help and counselling.

I will never tell anyone that my child left for two years and now returned. When he bites or hits other children at school, I cannot tell the truth. They tell me he needs to play with more children so that he can integrate himself, but they don’t know that the truth is that he was not with me. I can’t tell them that he is rebellious for that reason. (Case 29)
Securing Your Rights

In order to better secure parents’ rights, three actions can be taken:

1) Make sure to obtain accurate information regarding your legal status and rights.

2) Find out about and use the social services that are offered in your community. There are organizations that provide support for parents.

3) When possible, find a lawyer or some form of trusted legal advice such as a licensed immigration consultant.

Reunification

There are a number of issues to be attentive to during the process of family reunification. Be aware of the following:

1) In most cases, the process of reunification can take between one and three years, sometimes even up to five years. Having short-term and mid-term plans for yourself and your family during the time of separation will help you cope with the long wait.

2) Reunification is a happy but extremely challenging process. It is normal for children to miss their caregivers and the home they left behind.

3) When you reunite with your children, be attentive to signs of emotional distress (health problems, problems at school, sadness, anger, bedwetting) and ask for help at the school, your place of worship or a local community centre.

4) Seeking help from professionals (e.g., counsellors, therapists) can be beneficial. It is not a sign of personal failure. Many people receive help for a period of time and then move on with their lives.

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– Authors

For an in-depth version of this paper see:

Recommended Sources


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About Metropolis

Launched in 1996, the Metropolis Project aims to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by focusing scholarly attention on critical issues. It involves policymakers, researchers, and NGOs in all project initiatives.

Metropolis’ goals are to:
- Enhance academic research capacity;
- Focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options;
- Develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

Structured as a partnership, the project has both Canadian and international components. Metropolis encourages communication between interested stakeholders at the annual national and international conferences and at workshops, seminars, and roundtables organized by project members.

Find out more at: [www.metropolis.net](http://www.metropolis.net)

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