The Cost of “A Better Life”: Children Left Behind—Beyond Ambiguous Loss

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Abstract
Aim: The aim of the study is to learn how children left behind in El Salvador and Nicaragua, due to parental migration, experience care across borders. Demographics: 80 participants: adolescents (n = 21; age 13–18 years; 11 females and 10 males); emerging adults (n = 10; age 19–30 years; whose parents had migrated when they were children); grandparents and guardians caring for children whose parents had migrated (n = 14; 12 females and 2 males); professionals (social workers, nurses, lawyers, and teachers); and community leaders involved and/or working directly with children and youth whose parents had immigrated (n = 35). Methodology: Using grounded theory, the study began with one sensitizing concept: parental migration. Analysis: Modified grounded theory principles centered the exploratory nature of the study. Findings: The reconfiguration of the family after parental migration did not meet the emotional needs of children, challenging notions of a “better life.” Implications: These experiences are redefining notions of the transnational family through new geographies of care.

Keywords
early/emerging adulthood, family, gender, global/international issues, immigration issues

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Stories of family separation as a result of migration have historically been understood through the lens of economic survival, actualized via the sending of remittances to fulfill the promises of upward mobility for the children and family left behind. The migration-development nexus (Gammeltoft, 2002) is the combination of two adjunct narratives. First, migration for one or more member(s) increases financial security for themselves and those in their country of origin. The second describes the outcome of migration, which is the [illusive] “better life” for the family that results from economic security. The migration-development nexus in turn promotes national progress, as local economies increasing depend on the remittances for survival. This micro level enhancement is becoming the only option for those in the Global South, positioning the North as a beacon of hope (Carranza & Grigg, 2000). For Central American families, this contemporary reality of one or both parents’ work-migration is the lived consequences of the historical economic, political, and physical landscapes of violence and exploitation. This displacement is shifting configurations of the family and familismo with complex emotional implications for the on the ground realities. This article presents how those involved in the care chain in El Salvador and Nicaragua understood this reconfiguration, made sense of the psychological and emotional consequences, while simultaneously, renegotiated their lives. Specifically, how this reconfiguring met children’s needs, despite the physical absence of one of more parents.

Researchers have focused on how transnational relationships are reconfigured from the perspective of those living in the settlement country (Dreby, 2007; Falicov, 2005) and the benefits of remittances (Castañeda & Buck, 2014). This focus hinges on the assumption that capital produced in the Global North can alleviate, in part, the economic instability of the South. Further, these assumptions presuppose that the positive outcomes of remittances negate the negative impacts of separated families (Castañeda and Buck, 2014). The value placed on the economic impact, and those providing labor in the Global North, speaks to whose voices are marginalized. Those with access to children and their caregivers left behind, for example, the scholars in Central America and other countries in the Global South are often not ascribed to the value of those in the Global North and their research gets less exposure (Carranza, 2021). Those in the Central American diaspora experience barriers to research funding and challenges to the validity of fieldwork outside of the Global North. This, in part, problematizes access and capacity to those “left behind” and reflects the dominant of knowledge in the Global North. This article continues the work of scholars such as Dreby (2010); Castañeda and Buck (2014) that have conducted fieldwork in sending communities and speak to the emotional nuances, to create a more fulsome picture of the transnational family. To do so, the focus is on how children experience parenting across borders, and the degree to which the care arrangements fill the void of those absent, in the daily routines and intimacies, without their physical presence. The research questions included: How does
Understanding Transnational Families

Transnational families from Central America represent the intersection of political violence, geopolitical realities, and class positioning. Transnationalism is defined as the state of being in several spaces or nations, wherein interconnectedness of migrants and those who remain in the country of origin develop. Transnational parents split their labor across geographical borders. Schmalzbauer (2004), in exploring the structure of cross-border division of labor, reveals the intertwining of the macro focus of transnationalism with the micro level of the family. That is, productive labor in the receiving country and reproductive labor “back home” (Schmalzbauer, 2004). This makes remittances to those left behind possible and is one way that family and social relationships are re-constructed and maintained after migration (Falicov, 2007). The decision to migrate and to provide financial stability is not simple; parents are consistently assessing the cost-benefit of leaving their children behind (Castañeda & Buck, 2014). Productive labor fuels the economic advancement of the Global North, while forcing parents to redefine their reproductive labor “back home” (Schmalzbauer, 2004). It has been argued that transnational relations challenge pre-conceived notions related to the nuclear, Eurocentric versions of family (Olwig, 2007).

Boccagni (2012) and Menjívar (2012) have highlighted the dearth of information regarding how parenting is practiced and understood within separation, and the intersections of gender in mothering and women’s migrant labor. There has been a strong focus on the impacts of remittances over emotional processes of separation and navigating gender within this. While interest in transnational families has increased in recent decades, the emotional implications for those left behind are not as prominent in the literature (Carling, Menjívar & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015). This, too, can be understood as a by-product of the migration-development nexus, where children are the beneficiary of a “better life.” Negative experiences are more than “worth it” and diminish how deep the costs are (Castañeda & Buck, 2014).

The Structure of the Family in El Salvador and Nicaragua

While the regions studied in have nuanced and varied social and political landscapes, there is much overlap with their colonial history, geopolitical
realities, and the social structures of Central America—including shared religious values, with Catholicism being the dominant (Carranza, 2018). From their shared history and religiosity, the concept of the family or familismo has become an organizing social principle. Many migrants from Central America continue the practices of familismo, maintaining connections as a part of their process of developing their new identity in the diaspora and amidst transnationalism (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Letters, photos, and phone calls kept connections strong, and more recently technology has added another avenue for Salvadorians and Nicaraguans to maintain and renegotiate their relationships in new ways (Francisco, 2015; Gallardo, 2009). With technological advances, such as smart phones and social media, communication is now in “real time.” The ability to rapidly communicate suggests that separated families are able to make decisions in timely ways and have increased knowledge and involvement in the day-to-day. Fransisco (2015) found that the “real time” and visual elements of video chat technology added a level of intimacy that was not present with letters and photos, thus enhancing relationships of transnational families.

Rooted in history and central to the family are values such as respect, dignity, and honor. These dovetailed with the organizing cultural concepts of marianismo and machismo are thought to provide the backbone to the family. Thus, shaping how the family functions while also informing hegemonic notions of motherhood (Carranza, 2018; Menjivar, 2012). Machismo directs men to be breadwinners, disciplinarians, and the overall Patriarch to the family, making key decisions for the future. Marianismo contends that women are the moral compass for the family, whose ultimate role is the self-sacrifice of motherhood. As Carranza (2018) notes, the values associated with Marianismo have become internalized by women and act as the benchmarks for success. Although these concepts are evolving, to some extent they continue to organize both—gender psychological schemas and gender scripts in the family.

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) noted that Latin American women were forging new pathways and rupturing how mothering was practiced across the Americas via transnational care chains. However, challenging the institution of motherhood did have “deep costs” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997, p. 449). Along with Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) discussion of Latina motherhood, studies analyzing gender focused on how responsibilities were renegotiated during migration, specifically how care labor extends beyond borders (Hoang, et al., 2015). Gender as a central structure in Central American families emerged as an organizing theme in this research. As Fauné (1995) contends, women are reorganizing the family in Central America in their response to both violence and poverty through migration, in their economic reproduction strategies through migration and renegotiating motherhood. As Carranza et al. (2020) have suggested, women
are unevenly impacted by economic inequality and are in higher demand for labor in the Global North. Central American mothers are changing. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) noted despite their physical absence the day-to-day intimacies of parenting remain with the mother (Boccagni, 2012; Menjívar, 2012). Their roles are now evolving to include the breadwinner (Fauné, 1995), and women have been found to sacrifice more than their male counterparts to financially support their family (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011).

**Context of Migration**

Both, El Salvador and Nicaragua, have experienced their own natural disasters, revolutions, civil unrest, and resistances, which have shaped their histories and displacement of its citizens. There is, too, a shared history of violent colonization and on-going political involvement of the United States and economic restructuring via the World Bank (Carranza et al., 2020). Civil wars, the militarization of the regions in the 1970s, exacerbated by austerity measures under the 1990’s neoliberalism have forcibly displaced millions of Central Americans (Menjívar, 2012). Organized crime and gang violence has not only exacerbated this instability but given rise to one of the deadliest regions in the world and marked a “new wave” of migration from Central America (Cantor, 2014). Many have sought refuge in the United States, and recently Canada—some escaping extreme poverty, others pursuing the [elusive] dream of a “better life,” and fleeing governmental oppression and violent uprisings (Cantor, 2014).

Immigration policies of the Global North remain in lock-step with the flow of people. The Global North has developed a punitive approach to immigration—often creating lengthy waits for citizenship or forcing migrants to live on the margins of legality (Menjívar, 2012). Precarious protections and undocumented legal status have characterized much of Central America’s migration to the North, forcing families apart (Menjívar, 2012). Whereas previous generations entertained the notion of keeping their families together, by either migrating as a unit or in phases (known as “chain migration”), recent legislation has all, but codified family separation in policy (Boccagni, 2012; Enchautegui & Menjívar, 2015; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). As a result, parenting from afar has become a “new normal” for children in the Global South (Boccagni, 2012; Enchautegui & Menjívar, 2015). Migration remains stratified by class position, whereas financial security may increase mobility, leaving little options for survival among lower classes (Carling, et al., 2012).

Carranza & Grigg (2000) found that various configurations of separated families are on the rise because of the Global North’s continued violence toward the South. Despite the increasing Central American diaspora worldwide, accurate information about the number of migrants leaving their
children behind is limited, most of which has been extrapolated from smaller scale studies (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015). Research has been hindered by notions of the “nuclear family” that haunts the lens in which separated families are understood. The nuclear family, while changing to encompass shifts in gender, sexualities, and some cultural considerations, remains rooted in ideas of living together, or in the same country. Studies of family separation has been framed by a type of methodological nationalism (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011)—where the unit of analysis resides within the same national borders. While transnational work, to some degree negates this, methodologies and mindsets remain trapped in the nation-state. Moreover, few articles have studied this phenomenon as unique (Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015) and treat separation as a temporary phase on the pathway to reunification (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). However, this is no longer reflective of reality. On-going structural and political violence, including poverty, has forced families, namely, mothers, into an irreconcilable choice: stay together and live in poverty; separate and meet basic needs.

**Children Left Behind**

Research on children left behind and separated families have encountered both methodological and theoretical challenges in the Global North as western ways of understanding these complexities have failed to present a complete picture. Their experiences are a central piece of this transnational configuration. While there has been less attention on how children understand borders and the division of the family (Kutsar et al., 2014), the following outlines the important work that has been done in this area. The studies have yielded mixed results—signaling a need for on-going research as scholars have identified significant growth and new care chains. Olwig (2007) in her research with Caribbean families suggests a new model, or “global children,” which offers the possibility of understanding caregiving from multiple sources, those at home and abroad. Parreñas (2005) has suggested that in some countries, parental migration has become a normative structure and that families have been able to successfully re-organize to meet the emotional and mental wellbeing needs of young people. In Latin American countries, transnational families maintain their emotional responsibilities, such as mothering from afar (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Despite reconfigurations, Carling and et al. (2012) have contended that children are paying the price of economic development as recent research has suggested that there may be another side for those left behind (Fouratt, 2017; Pratt, 2016). In Central America specifically, parental migration is creating a new vulnerability for young people in terms of social and gang violence (Cantor, 2014).

Further, those leaving and those left behind may have different views on a “better life” and remittances as a driver. For example, mothers often associate
remittances with caregiving and idealize their relationship with their children (Schmalzbauer, 2004), while Fouratt (2017) and Carling and et al. (2012) found that receivers experience feelings of abandonment, especially toward mothers. Parreñas, (2005) found that children have a difficult time developing emotional attachments to their caregivers and their parents, leading to poor psychosocial outcomes. Conversely, other studies have noted feelings of abandonment do not always result in additional negative mental health outcomes, especially when young people are active participants in the reconfiguring of caregiving (Hoang et al., 2015; Vanore, Mazzucato & Siegel, 2015). Pratt (2016) found that when the task of primary emotional caregiving is reassigned to a surrogate who is physically present, many of these negative consequences are mitigated (Pratt, 2016).

Which parent migrates is central to an examination of children left behind as men and women play different roles in the Central American family. Paz Cruz’s study (1987, cited in Pratt, 2016) found that 59.5% of children would advise friends to allow their fathers to go abroad, 19.7% would advise both parents, and only 3.6% would advise friends to allow their mothers to work abroad (394). Peng and Wong (2016) examined how mothers found and worked with left behind caregivers, and the mental, emotional, and physical labor associated with these arrangements. When women migrated, they remained responsible for the emotional labor and were active in reorganizing and assigning caregiving tasks to others (Dreby 2010; Lam & Yeoh, 2016; Parreñas 2005; Pratt, 2016). Maternal migration resulted in a decline in school performance and the feeling that the support they receive is “not enough” (Pratt, 2016). This indicates that the restructuring of emotional labor across borders and the caring by female extended kin does not meet the emotional needs of children (Hoang et al., 2015; Pratt, 2016). Pratt (2016) found that when fathers migrated, the family unit required little reorganization, with women maintaining the emotional wellness of the children. Despite notions of masculinity being threatened when fathers were left behind, there is evidence to suggest their increased involvement (Peng & Wong, 2016). Lam and Yeoh (2016) contended that when fathers migrated, children felt a responsibility to excel in their studies and perform household duties.

Methodology: Theoretical Frameworks

Caring for children during and after parental migration can be understood through two adjunct frameworks. The first is informal or kin-based foster care. This takes place when young people are left in the care and protection of someone that has a pre-existing relationship with the family (Leinaweaver, 2014). Leinaweaver’s (2014) study concluded that this type of caregiving arrangement offered many possibilities to expand a child’s sense of family and allowed for the maintenance of connection to the biological parent. The
possibility that one or both parents may return is seen as a positive. In certain countries, to overcome geographical barriers and bridge the rural/urban divide, informal kin or foster care has been used as a method of upward mobility. Children are sent to live with kin in the city, in order to gain access to better education and opportunities, or parents move to provide economic support (Leinaweaver, 2014; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). International or transnational parenting presents some new challenges to the concept of informal kinship care. Parenting visits are not as accessible due to costs and citizenship restrictions in the Global North, make returning challenging. Also, deep divisions in socio-economic status can create resentment (Leinaweaver, 2014), so parents’ reality in the “wealthy” Global North may not be understood (Schmalzbauer, 2008).

The second framework is ambiguous loss. Boss (2007) defines this construct as a loss that remains incomplete or unclear due to a lack of information about the whereabouts and the absence of the individual. This unknown can create a sense of confusion, which prevents a holistic understanding of the events, closure, and the grief associated with migration is present, but complex (Lovato, 2019). Boss’s (2007) concept of ambiguous loss is understood as remaining psychologically connected to family members who have left while being strongly affected by their physical absence. For children, they have lost the physical connection and are uncertain of the future of their relationship and are now encouraged to transfer, emotionally, physically and mentally into a new caregiver–child dyad. But at the same time, remain connected to the parent that has left. This situation is often highly unstable as it may be temporary or potentially a forever arrangement. In cases of migration, or separated families Falicov (2005) and Lovato (2019) discuss the silence that characterizes the grief, as the parent remains present children are often not given space and time to grieve. This shaped their experience of loss. It can, then, be argued that the ambiguity and uncertainty of these losses remains a salient factor in the family’s reorganization, and can alter the trajectory of the reconfiguration. These contributing factors can leave the emotional tasks associated with loss and grief, in a liminal state—children and caregivers are left with uncertainty for the future of their care configuration and beyond.

**Methods**

This study used qualitative methods that were suited to the exploratory nature of the subject. As the research on the implications for children left behind is in its infancy, understanding how this phenomenon is experienced was central to advancing knowledge on the subject. Anthropological observations (Spencer & Davies, 2010), in-depth individual interviews, and focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009) were carried out in various communities in each country by the
principal investigator (PI). Nicaragua (Estelí, Granada, Managua, and León) and El Salvador (Cacaopera, Suchitoto, Nejapa, and Santa Rosa Guachipilín). All data collection was conducted in Spanish, using the colloquial language of the region, which was known to the PI. All interviews and focus groups were audio-taped with the participants’ verbal consent. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and focus groups were 1–2 hours in duration. Ethical clearance was obtained from the PI’s university ethics review board prior to recruitment and data collection.

Grounded theory was used to begin generating conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2005). The study began with one sensitizing concept (Glaser, 2002): parental migration. Salvadorians and Nicaraguans have developed collective histories over generations through oral traditions, so narrative inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007) was utilized for its minimally intrusive way of collecting personal stories. All data collection took the form of conversations about everyday life, which encouraged a familiar relationship between the researcher and the participants. According to Connelly and Clandinin, “people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are...as they interpret their past [and present] in terms of these stories ... stories are like portals in which people enter to tell others about what is significant in their lives” (2006: 375). Webster and Mertova (2007) also argued that people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them: stories are told in the context of new [and old] events; they do not occur in a vacuum but are informed by personal and community life. Conversations centered on: How do participants perceive the migration of a loved family member, especially the changes in their relationship? How is this shaping their day-to-day lives?

Reactivity. Reactivity enables researchers to be sensitive to the impact of power on the participants’ and in particular their influence on the process and data collection (Carranza, 2021). In this research, the social location of the PI evoked questions of the insider/outside debate and access to information. Participants did not need to alter their language. As a Central American woman and mother, there was the connection of language, culture, experiences of war and knowledge of Marianismo. As a member of the diaspora, there was a shared sense of the challenges related to resettlement, exclusion, and the longing for “home.” There was an embedded trust—as being one of their own. Sharing the experience of mothering strengthened the perception of “insider” knowledge of their realities of familismo and existing in a transnational family. However, this too presented some challenges as participants made assumptions about shared knowledge and experiences. This allowed the PI to interrogate the “you know,” the nuances and/or dissonance within their stories.

Recruitment. Initially, the PI approached organizations involved with young people. In El Salvador: Association of Communal Projects
(PROCOMES, in Spanish), Research Centre of Commerce (CEICOM, in Spanish). In Nicaragua: *La Casa del Adolescente* [Adolescent’s Home], Miriam Association, Autonomous University of Nicaragua-Estelí Campus to support participants’ recruitment of through their networks. Information packages were posted in public places, such as libraries and doctors’ offices. Leaders from communities known to have high levels of absent parents due to immigration were targeted. Youth groups and schools were approached; a snowball style was also implemented (Seale, 1999)

**Description of Participants.** There were a total of 80 participants. Four sets of participants were selected: Set one: Adolescents (*n* = 21; age 13–18 years; 11 females and 10 males); set two: youth (*n* = 10; age 19–30 years; whose parents had migrated when they were children; six males and four females); set three: Grandparents and guardians caring for children whose parents had migrated (*n* = 14; 12 females and 2 males); set four: focus groups of professionals (social workers, nurses, lawyers, and teachers); and community leaders involved and/or working directly with children and youth whose parents had immigrated (*n* = 35; 2 in El Salvador and 2 in Nicaragua). Interviews were conducted in areas chosen by the participants, namely, their homes, but also at local spots. Focus groups were conducted by the PI at the collaborating organizations. Data collection ended when saturation was achieved.

**Transcription and Translation.** The audio recordings were transcribed by the project RAs and employees of the collaborating organizations. Codes, categories, and themes emerged during this process and through collective dialog. Translation was conducted by the PI and “fact checked” for reliability with the rest of the team and was completed word for word, placing the concepts in the respective context. “Conceptual equivalence” means that the translator must communicate the concepts described by the participant (Jandt, 2017). As an iterative process, the texts were consistently checked against one another to ensure the PI was not “speaking for” participants’ and ensuring their realities were represented with accuracy. As a native Spanish speaker, the PI was able to note the semiotics, meanings, signs, and realities of the quotes translated. This ensured their embedded meanings were carried over from Spanish to English.

**Analysis.** As this study had no preconceived notions of what the experiences of those left behind entailed, modified grounded theory principles were deemed to be well suited to an exploratory study (Charmaz, 2005). The PI conducted training on data analysis with the team and RAs. Six community consultants (three per country) helped to ensure the labeling of themes, and categories was rooted in the participants’ experiences, sought alternative explanations to identify and account for disconfirming cases, and ensured the quality of the data analysis (Seale, 1999). To allow for training and familiarity with the process and data for the research team, analysis began after three
interviews and one focus group, which yielded a list of emerging categories wherein new categories from subsequent transcripts were added. The process of data collection was recursive, which informed the direction of successive interviews, and building on themes. Data were systematically gathered and analyzed using a “bottom up” strategy involving theme analysis (Charmaz, 2005). Transcriptions were entered into NVivo9 computer software for managing and analyzing qualitative data. As concepts and themes were identified and classified during the analytical process, they were compared, contrasted, and grouped using the open coding procedure described by Strauss and Corbin (1994). Axial coding was also employed to construct conceptual schemas that reflected relationships between categories. During this process, categories were altered, dropped, and systematized hierarchically and each was simultaneously related to its context (Charmaz, 2005). Constructionist thematic analysis was also used to understand how reality was created in the data. During this process, latent codes were also searched out in the underlying meanings presented by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

This section begins with a brief summary of the data gathered through observations in each country, followed by the primary themes that emerged during analysis.

Parental Migration: Absence and Empty Spaces

Prior to data collection, the PI spent several months in each region engaged in anthropological observations. The goal was to observe the “grand narratives” of migration on the ground. Immigration to El Norte [The North] and to Costa Rica (in the case of Nicaragua) remains a rite of passage and a way out of poverty. Particular geographic areas of Nicaragua are commonly known as pueblos de los blancos [white peoples’ towns], to denote that the vast majority of parents in those villages have migrated to El Norte. Their children are cared for grandparents or the community as a whole. At a cultural event in Nicaragua, a young couple was observed discussing how it would be the last time they would attend such an event together, as the man was leaving for El Norte. As the conversation continued, a friend of the couple commented that the husband would be able to send money and provide a “better life for their expectant child” as that was what her own partner was doing. What was evident was that these understandings of migration were “a matter of fact” and a part of “the ordinary.” The “ordinary” in areas with high parental migration was the grandmother assumed the role of primary caregiver. There were rural areas in El Salvador where the mothers in entire villages had immigrated to Canada. In one of the villages (Santa Rosa Guachipilín), the school was named
Escuela de Toronto [School of Toronto] because it had been built using remittances from parents living in Toronto.

In another village in El Salvador, I attended a mothers’ day celebration taking place at the public park. During the celebration, I observed groups of children weeping while consoling each other. At first, I assumed that someone had died; however, as I got closer to the various groups I observed that they each were sharing stories about their memories of their mothers who now were away in El Norte. Although the migration of either fathers or mothers is a significant loss, the maternal void was noted to be of greater significance.

Responding to Lived Realities: A “Better Life” for the Children Left Behind

El Salvador and Nicaragua’s positions in the global economy have created a reality in which migration to the Global North has become one of the few options for economic survival. In speaking to the range of push factors for migration, participants focused on the current economic situation of their countries. Upward mobility and the desire to improve class positioning was understood to factor into decisions, but the majority of participants spoke about the failures of the current labor and that they were falling short of meeting basic needs and providing a “better life for their children.” In this economic reality, a “better life” has been understood as providing for their family’s basic needs. The high cost of food was a significant challenge for many families. Housing, and in some cases opportunities for education were the cornerstones of “a better life.” The following quote highlights the complexities experienced by those involved with parental migration and the achievement of a “better life”:

It’s hard sometimes ‘cause parents leave to provide a better life for their children, but when I see these kids sort of lost, I asked myself, ‘what is a better life?’ Yes, they no longer go hungry. There is always food on the table, but their mother is not there…It makes you think…really what is a better life?

Another adolescent commented the following:

Me and my brothers have our basic needs covered. My parents send us what we need, but the money and things do no compensate for the loneliness and the lack of affection that we endure every day…

Of great significance is that those occupying these spaces are actively interrogating what constitutes “a better life.” The absence of a parent, namely, the mother, and subsequent family re-structuring, left an emotional void but provided financial support. In challenging these notions, participants
discussed the contradictions between “a better life” and the realities that are restructuring the lives of the children left behind. This paradox of parental migration highlights the material relations between to Global South/North. Questioning of what is considered “a better life,” alludes to the micro level realities of uneven development experienced by those in the Global South. The on-the-ground reality of this economic inequality can be found in the dilemma parents in the Global South face: leave to provide the bare necessities or stay, and live in poverty, but maintaining the family structure. This paradox in many ways underpins the transformation of the family unit in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Living amid ambiguous loss: Co-location of overlapping grief in the family system. The impact of maternal migration is deeply felt across generations and relationally. The experience of grieving the loss of a loved one is marked by ambiguity and the unknown for the future. In the following quote, a grandmother explores how losing her daughter and re-establishing a long-distance relationship, is unresolved and marked by ambiguous losses by her and her grandchildren in their experiences:

It’s not the same for the children. You try to feel the void, but I know it’s not the same, because I feel it too…I miss my daughter too…I hear the youngest [6 years old] cry herself at night and the oldest tries to console her. We live in a very small place…so you hear it… It breaks my heart, but she [daughter] left for El Norte to provide for her children…she couldn’t do it here…She left me [with emphasis] too. I, too, miss her a lot [teary eyes]

For the caregivers left behind, their ability to provide for the children reflects the complexities of the situation. They are feeling the physical and psychological loss of their own children, while developing a new way of engaging. Amid these feelings of on-going grief, they much incorporate the emotional bonds of a parent/adult child dynamic, as well as co-parenting. Caregivers must also foster the relations of children to their parents. For children, their mothers’ absence is felt not only in their day-to-day routines that embodied their mother–child relation, but as the following quote indicates, the loss is felt on behalf of their siblings as well:

My mom has been gone for many years now. I should be used to it now, but I am not able. I still feel very sad [pause]…not only for me, but also for my younger siblings. My youngest brother does not want to do his First Communion because he says, ‘All the children there will have their mothers…He doesn’t have a mother…He does not have a mother to go with.’ I tell him that I will go with him or that grandma will accompany him, if he wishes. But he says, ‘None of you is my mom!’
An adolescent explained how the loss was felt at the family level but experienced more poignantly by his younger brother:

My youngest brother is the most affected. He is angry all the time. He misbehaves. He is in grade 9 now. I hope he gets better. My youngest brother is in grade 5 now...It has been hard for all of us...

As children grow without their mothers, they experience loss for themselves and simultaneously for their siblings. Older children are often tasked with resolving their own grief while holding space for their younger siblings. While this shared sense of loss may constitute a new sibling bond and provide resilience within the family, it is often a challenge to interact so closely with the pain of a loved one.

**Maternal absence in day-to-day routines.** Participants echoed each other as they shared either their own experiences or the observations of maternal absence in the life of children. One of great significance was the on-going emotional impact on children and youth, and the difficulties they experienced in receiving, or absence of, care from another person. Their mothers and fathers were no longer able to share in the day-to-day experiences of growing up, a loss they were navigating while in a key stage of development themselves and emerging new kin relations. In an interview, a 14-year-old girl, very quietly and with a deep sadness in her eyes, commented:

you cannot go to her when something bad happens ... when you’re happy or when you’re sad...you cannot tell her about your day at school, or that a boy said, ‘hi’ or smiled at you...No, you can’t ...! you feel different from the others kids... something is missing ... it feels weird ...it feels empty...it’s hard to describe...

In between tears, a 13-year-old girl shared the following:

I was seven or eight [years of age] when my mom left. She was very loving... [crying] gave me lots of kisses and hugs. We shared a lot things together. How I wish for her to return...I miss her so much...more so when we celebrate Mother’s Day at school. Some of my friends bring their mothers to school...and I...I am alone...

Emptiness framed their experiences of receiving care, from both their kin and biological parents. Young people were required to engage with the new and the already established caregivers, transferring the physical and day-to-day needs to who was physically present and saving the emotional requirements for their parents. The new navigating and transformation of
relationships was occurring within the context of uncertainty, if their family would be reunited or if this was the permanent structure.

**“Something is Missing”: Not here, but not gone.** When a parent migrated, this prompted a restructuring of the family unit to include new day-to-day caregivers while weaving in the virtual participation of those who were absent. Despite the hope and desire to maintain bonds, routines, and rituals, there was a significant and ambiguous, sense of loss driving the re-structured family configuration. The challenge of reorganizing the family in the face of survival was not knowing the length of the new way, or if it was permanent. The ambiguity was felt in different ways, but they shared the experience of a lack of comfort or stability in the new routine and reality. The children know their mother is alive, but yet her physical and day-to-day presence is lost. This type of loss becomes a central organizing pillar in the family. Coming to terms with such absence is not easy for those left behind, particularly, because their relationships are built in the closeness of their home, for example, through a warm look of approval or love, a stroke to denote pride, or through *el calorcito de una caricia* [the warmth of a caress (touch)]. It is on these daily engagements that their sense of belonging and existence is rooted. It is what gives meaning to their day-to-day life.

**“It is not the same - not alike”.** According to the participants, one of the consequences of maternal migration is the fact that the invisible roles and responsibilities carried by “moms”—that is, providing the emotional security and day-to-day affection, must be carried by someone else in the family or community—generally other women. For many of the participants who were emotionally struggling at the time of data collection, they spoke to the theme “It is not the same—not alike.” One 14-year-old said, “I say, it is no longer the same... when the woman that gave you [with emphasis] life is gone ... like she’s not gone, gone like dead... I mean she’s not here”. The following comment from a 15 year-old boy, further illustrates this feeling:

She [mother] calls me every week, but I say it’s not the same ... not the same when you are no longer with your mom. In my case, I stayed with my grandmother, but I’d say that is not the same - not alike because you feel that they do not have to worry about you, care for you or love you! Yes, she’s my grandma, but is not the same...Sometimes, I start to think that maybe the money she gets is more important than me... Like, would she still care for me, if she didn’t get money?

Participants’ were often unable to describe the full magnitude of their experiences in having to develop new interactional patterns in the face of physical loss. For many, the way they developed their emotional patterns of engagement was through living together and sharing a way of life. In the face of migration, the emotional connection remained, but the foundation had
shifted. It is because of this that family members often experienced this differently, grandparents and older siblings often spent the most time with the parent that migrated, while younger siblings were raised with more long-distance engagement.

**The children left behind: Enacting grief and ambiguous loss.** The family structure continues to evolve throughout the life course, finding new ways to maintain or move away from transnational ties. The consequences of a “better life” for those left behind are not limited to family, but the communities as well. According to one service provider:

> Immigration brings about a crude reality…Its consequences are very negative for all the family members involved, particularly those left behind. It brings about family disintegration, emotional and social problems…

Migration leaves behind a new family structure that is based around grief and uncertainty. Responsibilities often fall to family members, leading to those left behind to play multiple roles, to maintain cohesiveness, emotional wellness, and the focus on “a better life.”

**Resentment.** Older siblings, grandparents, and family friends often assumed the role of caregiver in maternal absence. These kin relationships provided continuity of care; however, this was at times complicated by role confusion and difficulty navigating the negative feelings associated with loss. Many caregivers identified a struggle in their compassion for the child left behind while knowing their parent had very little options. The following quote from a young person highlights these complexities:

> It was very difficult at the beginning. My mom left leaving my younger brothers and sisters with me. I was only 13 or 14 [years-old]. I didn’t have any experience being a mom. Like my youngest brother grew up calling me mom. But when he grew up the other kids told him that I was not his mother…that he didn’t have to listen to me ‘cause I was not his mom…One day, he asked me…I told him the truth…like I didn’t want to lie to him. But, I also told him that I loved him like he was my own son. I still do. I think he was the most affected of all of us…I see it in his eyes…like he’s broken, missing something inside…

A **grandmother commented**

> It is very hard to watch my grandchildren suffer. I feel powerless…I see them suffering and holding resentment against their mother. The youngest one does not even know her. He might have a very vague memory of her. He is the most rebellious of them all…
The above quotes demonstrate the sense of confusion and perhaps abandonment, children experience, which to a degree remains unresolved, as a result of their mothers’ migration. The findings indicate that mother–child relations become reduced to material exchanges:

I care for my nephew. When his mother calls him, he doesn’t even want to talk to her. From the get go, he says, ‘mom I want money for this for that or send me shoes, a stereo, games’. But he does not even allow her to ask him how he’s doing at school not even want to talk with her....

The children’s losses, struggles, and subsequent impact on their behavior are known among members of the community and service providers. Their perceptions on the subject at hand help shed some insights as well. The following discussion took place in a focus group with people (teachers, social workers, and nurses) who work with children growing up without their parents due to migration:

When the parents migrate, they leave their children with the grandparents. The children behave differently with the grandparents. They don’t see the grandparents as people with authority. They see their grandparents having a very different role, more like a friend a support and not someone with authority like their parents... But when the parents are gone, they send money and support the household, but the authority falls on them [grandparents]. They, then, have to make sure they go to school. It becomes more difficult when the children become adolescents...When a family is affected by migration, they lose the very basis of its foundation...I mean their relationship with each other and emotional bonds between them...

In speaking about the impact on children, one service provider commented:

The children tend to misbehave. They don’t respect anybody, their elders, like their teachers or anybody. They don’t follow discipline. All is because they don’t listen to their grandparents. They don’t want to accept the discipline of their grandparents. They don’t listen. They are out on the streets pass midnight. They do whatever they feel like it and when they feel like it. They don’t respect rules. They don’t respect their elderly. They skip school and spend their day playing soccer or at the park. Or perhaps they do that to survive because of whatever they are living at home...

The community felt that “acting out” was a direct result of the loss of a parent, and the barriers experienced by the new caregiver to successfully developing both emotionally close and an authoritative role. For young people, parental relationships are substituted for economic support, in turn,
creating a climate of emotional dissonance impacting cohesiveness and the sense of the collective.

**Low academic performance and school dropout.** Contrary to the desire for an increase, one of the outcomes of parental migration was noted to be a decrease in educational attainment and upward mobility. During a focus group, one participant noted “There is high incidence of school dropout among these children. Their academic performance is also very poor.” Speaking to emotional wellness, an eighth-grade teacher commented:

You see them on the playground or on their way home, they are lost. Some of them are angry. Their grades suffer. I mean they don’t care anymore and perhaps that is the very reason parents go to *El Norte*...so their children have more educational opportunities...But they start to get into trouble—particularly boys—they don’t listen to nobody. Their authority figure is gone... It’s hard for them...

Another participant noted

Many families leave searching for a “better life”... better conditions for their family, that is in quotes of course because that is debatable. Here [locality name] we are finding many children dropping out of school. Sometimes they don’t have any guidance...they experience sexual violence, physical or emotional violence...

Participants’ suggested that one of the consequences of parental migration was the creation of new social vulnerabilities in the context of on-going gang violence. As indicated, children became “lost” without their parents and became disconnected from their caregivers, school, and the community. According to participants, without parental protections, children and young people became vulnerable to trafficking and drug use.

**Acting out, drug misuse and teen pregnancy.** A significant theme emerging from the data was that of “acting out” and was particularly noted by service providers and caregivers. One caregiver explained, “They [adolescents] don’t care about anything anymore. They wait for the remittance and they blow it on whatever...he is failing. He is into drugs. He is unruly”

A grandfather who is caring for his grandchildren noted:

My daughter left three children with me and my wife...they left to go with their other grandparents soon after ‘because they said I was too strict...a couple of months later they left their house too and went and rented a place on their own. The 14-year-old was looking after the other two. She is 15 now and pregnant, while the boy is a *drogo* [drug addict] and a *bolito* [drunk]. He is only 13
[sigh]...the other boy is only 10...I don’t know what is going to happen with him...people tell me they don’t go to school...That is the reason their mother left so they could go to school. I tell my daughter to come back, but she says, tengo que arreglar los papeles primero [I have to get papers (green card or permanent residency) first]...

One teacher explained that

They also are a higher risk of abuse, trafficking...you see them very young in night clubs dancing very provocatively ...maybe high [in drugs] or drunk. The government is doing nothing to prevent all this...We as professionals are doing nothing. We are just passive observers...Where is our level of consciousness in all this?... They boost themselves by saying, ‘Oh my son or daughter is sending money to build all this. But they only focus on their economic development or maybe they think that the solution to their problems is the money. But that family will have stability when that man or that women come back from Los estados [US] and is able to live day-to-day with the family. But when they tell you that he or she has been gone for 10 years then you begin to wonder about the affective aspect or how will they manage to re-establish those family connections again...

The participants indicated that in many ways, children lose their way forward when caring is delivered via distance and the only tangible connection is found through remittances. The void of nurturance, pain and ambiguity of their loss, is at times is filled by drugs and other possessions and, is a challenge to re-establish after extended periods of time.

Moving On: Finding Surrogate Mothers and Fathers, and a Sense of Belonging

After long separations, there is often irreparable damage to the parent–child relationship. The emotional bonds that previously held these deteriorate and new relationships are formed, as children grieve and accept the fact their mother or father is gone. A 17-year-old boy commented:

She left me living with my aunt when she left. She’s in Alaska! ... I was very small...Two [years-old] I think. Yeah, she called and she came to see me from time to time ... for a week or so. She’d bring me things and stuff ... but it’s not the same ...It feels different ... I mean I know she’s my mom, but when she is here and I want some affection I do not want it from her. Or when I get in trouble. I don’t listen to her... [I] just [listen to] my aunt. She gets angry, but the truth is that I know she is my mom, but for me, my mother is my aunt ... She wants me to
go with her, but I do not want to go. I want to stay with my aunt ...I feel that I belong with her. I mean I don’t know any different…

The above comment indicates that the children’s emotional vulnerabilities can be mitigated when the migrating parent is replaced by a loving and caring figure. However, the quotes also denote the complexities and the unavoidable tension that arise as family living abroad attempt to re-claim either their roles or their once close relationships with those left behind.

Children and youth also look to their peers for a sense of normalcy and belonging. One 13-year-old girl explained:

...I look for comfort...I search for solace in some of my friends who too are alone [sarcasm] and are able to understand what I’m feeling at that moment...There are a lot of children in my school whose mothers are in El Norte. They understand...

There is an appreciation for their sacrifice and contributions, yet as community members have stated, migrations altered the trajectory of their relationships and roles of the family. Different relationships are built, alternative attachments are developed, and new belongings are carved out. Members left behind need to map out how children will be protected and have their needs met for healthy development. Many people work to fill the void the migrating parent that has left while simultaneously moving forward with developmental tasks in respective their life cycle.

Discussion

Uncertainty was woven throughout the stories of children and their caregivers. This brought about questions of permanence and the authenticity through the relationships care chain. The loss and uncertainty was altered by the intersection of birth order and gender as older female siblings were often assigned care giving tasks. Coupled with ambiguity, the loss of a parent emerged as an emotional task, not only for each individual, but across generations and siblings. Older siblings felt the loss of the parent, and engaged with their siblings’ grief as their experiences overlapped, while providing comfort and holding space in the ways their experiences differed. Resentment was often born out of this uncertainty, not knowing if the parent would return, unable to experience the same emotional connection with those who had migrated and those tasked with their care.

After migration, mothers are no longer part of the geographical reality their children occupy on the daily basis, replaced by a “virtual presence.” No longer performing the routines and emotional affection through “caricias calientitas.” Their cherished relationship becomes mediated through material exchanges and
technology. The replacement was found to fall short of creating a “better life” for children from multiple perspectives. It was found to be ineffectual in resolving the emotional tasks associated with grief and loss, nor the milestones associated with developmental stages (i.e., dating). Children left behind are forced into a new familial reality—migration becomes an individual and a family marker—as they enter, forcefully, the realm of “transnational families.”

The results indicate that maternal migration brings to light the amount of invisible work that women invest in their families. This emotional and physical labor often went unnoticed until the caregiving arrangements were altered. Parental migration, especially the mother’s, disrupts the children’s sense of safety, security, and their sense of belonging. This is pivotal in not only legitimating the space children occupy but also in fostering the development of an active citizen or participant in the community. In other words, the findings indicate that the mother’s presence fosters the children’s right to exist and to belong within their own household, extended family, school, neighborhood, and overall community. The children and adolescents involved in this study questioned their worthiness and expressed mistrust for those charged with their care after their mother had left.

**Implications**

The findings add to the literature regarding transnational relationships in providing important insights about the how children understand the parent–caregiver–child triangle of care and their emotional needs. It supports the research of Castañeda and Buck (2011) who concluded that there was a significant emotional cost of remittance-led migration. There is an “emotional logic” of remittances activated by the sender and a subjective experience of the receiver—both of which “pay” for remittances. Their findings, as with this study, stress the importance of acknowledging the crisis that a family endures from separation. The experiences are often subsumed under the migration-development nexus and the narrative of a “better life” for the family. Kinship care may not provide the emotional nurturance and presence required for healthy development.

Further, it supports the application of ambiguous loss into the transnational caregiving from afar—adding much complexity. The results in this study reveal that the migration of parents, especially the loss of the mother leads children and adolescents to experience complex, ambiguous, and unresolved losses. This puts strain on the family and the communities in El Salvador and Nicaragua. As Boss (2007) suggests that ambiguity “freezes” the grief process, children left behind must incorporate the unknowing element of parental migration into their new relationships—and is often disenfranchised. They acutely experience the multiplicity of losing the physical presence of their parent while developing patterns with new caregivers. The findings
suggest children left behind are finding new ways to navigate their experiences of ambiguous loss without “resolve” while redefining their relations. 

More broadly speaking, the findings indicated that structural (e.g., poverty) violence continues to force Central American women to leave their children and the feminization of labor pulls them North (Carranza et al., 2020). This research highlights the deeply gendered cleavages of poverty. Women are often unevenly impacted and forced to deal with the consequences of poverty, in an era of austerity (Carranza et al., 2020). As Moran-Taylor (2008) theorizes, due to the flow of global capital and the continued under-development of poverty in Central America, migration is increasingly becoming institutionalized. Highlighted in the selected quotes, women are often the migratory parent, which is a result of a combination between men’s absenteeism and the feminization of labor migration, which suggests a degree of paternal abdication of financial responsibilities. In female-led households, children were often left with extended family, questioning the role of the father in transnational families. This connects with previous research (e.g., Moran-Taylor 2008) noting that women are active agents in changing the face of migration.

The discourse underpinning migration is that citizens’ moving in search of a “better life” points to a more complex issue: motherless children in the Global South have become the new normal, exacerbating the existing inequalities between the Global North/South. The cost of food for children growing up in poverty equates to losing their mothers to El Norte to meet some of their basic human rights. State policies are urgently needed in El Salvador and Nicaragua to ensure the welfare of those whose parents are abroad. Interdisciplinary Institutional programs and services need to be developed across sectors, for example, at schools and grassroots organizations. The state needs to ensure that the influx of migrants’ remittances is utilized to support the wellness and holistic development of children and the women caring for them, to reduce further marginalization. Supports are needed for everyone left behind.

The findings also point to practice implications with parents living in the North. Their children live in a state of vulnerability that, at times, lead to emotional turmoil expressed by drug misuse, misbehaviors, premature pregnancy, and low academic performance. These outcomes are not what migrating parents expect, given that they perceive their journey as an everyday sacrifice. Receiving such news may shock them. As an emerging area, in particular, the permanency of separation and the institutionalizing of migration in Central America must be understood through the family unit as a whole and the experiences of loss.

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Ethics Statement

This study was reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research and Ethics Board.

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Note

1. Mothers’ day is very important event in Central America—as mothers are considered bearers of life, thus worthy of tribute and respect by the children, and often compared to Saints, for example, the Virgin Mary or the Virgin of Guadalupe.

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