Improving the health and well-being of children of migrant workers
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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that the states parties to the convention have the responsibility to ensure that children grow up in a family environment with happiness, love and understanding. 1 There are almost 1 billion migrants worldwide, with 214 million international migrants and another 740 million internal migrants moving within countries. 2 Migrants with children may leave their children behind while pursuing economic opportunities. Although there are no available data on the total number of children left behind globally, several reports on international migrants reflect the magnitude of this phenomenon. The Regional Thematic Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking estimates that in east and south-east Asia, one child is left behind for each adult working abroad. 3 Similarly, in the Republic of Moldova, the proportion of children younger than 14 years who are left behind is estimated to have increased from 16% to 31% between 2000 and 2004; in Mexico, more than a third of children experience household disruption due to migration. 4 The number of children left behind because their parents become internal migrants is even greater, particularly in those areas experiencing rapid urbanization. 5 Economic progress at the national level and more opportunities to escape poverty at the family level has led to an increase in the number of children separated from their parents. While urban-focused development does have benefits, it can also disrupt family structures and compromise the health and well-being of migrant families. The absence of parents and the challenges of rural life often leave these children particularly vulnerable to major health risks. While grandparents often take on child-rearing tasks, this makeshift solution falls short of optimal parenting.

Parent-child separation has a direct and immediate impact on a child’s physical, cognitive, mental and emotional well-being. Mounting evidence indicates that children separated from their parents fare worse in health outcomes. 6 Furthermore, adverse childhood events correlate positively with worse educational outcomes, adoption of risky behaviours, development of chronic mental and physical disease in adulthood, and suicide. 7 Childhood separation has a cross-generational effect that may continue to harm future generations. 8 This problem exists in high-income countries such as the Netherlands, in middle-income countries such as China and India and in low-income countries. 9 In response, the United Nations Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development 10 through its sustainable development goals (particularly SDG 17) 11 recognizes the importance of migration and calls on countries to implement research, policies and practices safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrant workers and their children.

To mitigate the adverse effects of migration on migrant families and pursue the agenda’s ambitious goals, many governments and child protection systems are increasingly adopting a holistic approach that focuses on poverty reduction, family-oriented education programmes, community support, early identification of risks and provision of specialist services for vulnerable children and their families. Strategies that may improve health outcomes include providing antenatal care, parental leave, child allowance for all families, nursery school for all children aged one to six years (as in some European countries), free medical care for all preschool children (as in Japan) and incentives for health-care professionals to practice in rural regions (as in Australia and New Zealand). 2

China is an extreme case that reveals the challenges that children of internal migrants face. While China’s unprecedented economic growth has vastly improved income in rural areas, urban income has increased disproportionately and rural-urban differences in wages and quality of life have widened. This pattern is associated with the largest internal migration in history, with a total of 274 million rural-to-urban migrants in 2014. 3 As a result, 61 million rural children (or a quarter of the country’s children) have been left behind by their parents between 2010 and 2014. 4 This problem is expected to worsen with China’s recent expansion to a two-child policy and continued government investment in urban economic development.

As elsewhere, the structural forces driving rural to urban migration in China include more job opportunities, higher wages, greater access to globalized goods and services, higher quality of housing and the status of being a city-dweller. Migrant workers often leave their children behind due to the lack of affordable child care and education close to the parents’ place of work and because of concerns about safety in cities. Chinese urban migrants include workers across the socioeconomic spectrum, although lower-income migrants face the greatest challenges.

The extent of the problem of left-behind children in countries such as China can be better understood if health is considered “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity,” 12 as defined by the World Health Organization. The Global Burden of Disease 2013 study reports that self-harm is the second leading cause of death among 10–24 year-olds, after road injuries. 13 Suicide rates in rural Chinese youth are threefold that of their urban counterparts, 14 with these rural-urban

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