

INTEGRATING A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE IN INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICY

*Queens College, City University of New York*¹

A. INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND FAMILIES

The current economic crisis calls for more comprehensive and coherent approaches to international migration policies. Migrants are generally not isolated individuals, but part of family systems and their actions are impacted and influenced by other family members. Policies organizing migration also have significant consequences on all parts of the family system. Therefore, instead of targeting individual international migrants, a more comprehensive approach would be to consider migrant families, since individuals are part of family systems, and as such when they migrate their whole system is changed. The policy focus needs to be shifted from the impact of migration on individuals to its impact on families, both in cases where the whole family migrates or when some parts of the system, such as the spouse or children, are remaining in the country of origin. Using a family perspective while developing international migration policies will promote a more integrated framework for the study of migration.

Given that migrants are part of family systems, a family perspective is recommended to be used in developing policies regulating international migration. Developing such policies requires research on international migrant families instead of research focusing on individual migrants. When conducting family impact analysis researchers examine intended and unintended consequences as well as the effectiveness of international migration policies on all family members and provide feedback for potentially needed policy revisions.

B. INTEGRATING A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE IN INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICY

1. Using a family perspective in policymaking

Family policies refer to Government activities that are designed intentionally to support families. Family policy can also be thought of as everything Governments do that affects families. Family policies may be explicit or implicit (Bogenschneider, 2006). Explicit family policies include those deliberately designed to achieve specific objectives regarding the family unit and its members, such as provisions for parental leave and protection mechanisms against domestic violence. Implicit family policies are not specifically intended to affect families but have indirect consequences on them. For example, policies regarding international migration have major consequences for families, although they do not directly target them. For these implicit family policies it is recommended to use a family perspective in policymaking (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, 2009). This perspective analyzes consequences of policies on family wellbeing, regardless of whether they were explicitly aimed at families. Social policies are generally focused on the individual and as such their evaluation is mostly focused on their impact on the individual, losing sight of their intended and unintended impact on the whole family system.

2. *Integrating a family perspective in international migration policy*

Using a family perspective in policymaking is recommended not only for developing migration policies, but for social policies in general. Social policies affecting families are generally organized around the main functions of the families, such as family formation and marriage, childrearing, providing financial support and providing care for members of families. Due to its complexity, international migration, and as such the policies regulating it, are impacting all of these family functions.

a. Migration and marriage

International migration has lasting effects on marriages, impacting spouses' relations in many areas such as communication or gender roles (Robila, 2009). Family education on the impact of migration on marriage is necessary in order to address some of the challenges brought by migration, to deal with them effectively and to avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. This is important when the family migrates as one unit as well as when only parts of the family migrate. Some of the challenges encountered by migrant couples when only one of the partners is migrating include the negotiation of long-distance relationships with spouses and children, communication and financial issues.

When families migrate together the major challenge is integration into the new society, securing employment and developing social networks. A major issue concerning immigrant families is the high prevalence of domestic violence due to social isolation, lack of family and social support and challenges brought by the migration process. This can be dealt with by having support programmes for immigrants that besides addressing other issues could also act as shelters or crisis intervention mechanisms. Thus, migration policies should include family education programmes of the impact of migration on families and should develop social support services, such as counselling and support groups, to all members of a migrant family in sending and receiving countries.

b. Migration and childrearing

International migration also affects childrearing. Parent education on the impact of migration on parent-child relations is necessary in order to make parents aware of the psychosocial implications of migration. This is important, when parents are taking their children and migrate together as a family, and also when one or both parents migrate leaving the child in the country of origin to be cared for by the other parent or another family member.

When children are migrating with their parents problems might relate to their adaptation to the new socio-cultural environment, integration in the school system of the host country and language proficiency. Social programmes designed to provide support to migrating families need to be organized in the sending country prior to departure as well as in the country of destination. Informing parents prior to departure about potential issues affecting their and their families' wellbeing and how they can prepare for them would maximize the benefits of the migration experience. Similar modules are helpful to be used for children, with different versions of these modules designed for children of different age groups.

In the case of children who remain in the country of origin while their parents are going abroad for work, several potential problems should be addressed beforehand. One of them is parental awareness of the impact of migration on the different areas of children's lives. Many times parents are not aware of the psychological consequences of their absence on child

development and functioning. Sometimes, parents consider that sending money home will compensate for the reduced physical contact with their children. Underlining the importance of maintaining the communication channels and the psychological and emotional contact with the child could reduce the adjustment difficulties encountered by some children and might prevent maladjustment associated with depression, poor school performance, social isolation, or delinquency. Providing social support for the child caregiver, being a parent, grandparent or another family member is a very important prevention and intervention mechanism. For example, extensive research presents the potential challenges that could be encountered by grandparents raising their grandchildren (Goodman et. al., 2008). Promoting father involvement in childrearing is necessary, especially in cases where the mother migrates and the father remains responsible for childrearing. Similarly important is the social support for children with migrant parents. Again, depending on the child's developmental stage, different programmes can be organized, such as support groups for teenagers or play therapy for younger children.

c. Migration and family financial support

Another family function is the provision of financial support to family members. Often, people migrate for economic reasons. International migration is impacted by and also influences family finances. Providing financial planning and money management workshops in sending countries would educate migrant families on how to effectively use and invest their finances. Developing systems to facilitate formal remittance-sending and investment strategies, including the promotion of low money transmission fees, would make the process of sending remittances easier and safer for families.

d. Migration and family care

International migration has a significant impact on family care, especially as women represent about 50 per cent of all international migrants. In most societies, women are still the main caregivers for children, elderly and family members with disabilities. As such, when they migrate, the care for vulnerable populations becomes a major problem, as the caregiving duties need to be delegated to other people, such as other family members, other immigrants or institutions. Migration policy should encourage gender equality so that men perform increased caregiving responsibilities, including taking parental or medical leave to care for a child or of ill and elderly family member. Further, policies should be put in place to help institutions provide high-quality care.

Considering the impact of international migration on families, it is imperative to integrate a family perspective in developing international migration policies. This process should be based on research among migrant families and be complemented by comprehensive evaluation mechanisms of how migration policies affect all areas of family functioning.

B. RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT FAMILIES

Any policy area needs to be informed and developed based on research. As such, developing policies targeting international migrants should use data from research on migrant families. Using the family as the unit of analysis instead of the individual will inform the policymaking process in more accurate and comprehensive ways. Research on international migration needs also to use a family systems approach and involve multiple informants and different methodologies.

Collecting data from multiple informants presents a major advantage since it provides different perspectives on the impact of migration on the whole family system. There is no other way of capturing this unless multiple members of the same household or family are surveyed or interviewed. Including only one family member would bias the results. Often, members of the same family system would have different opinions about how migration impacts their family life. A challenge for collecting data is related to the fact that some family members will be missing due to migration. However, the benefits of gathering different perspectives on the same issues surpass their costs. As such where possible it is recommended that multiple family members be included in the research process so that there is a complex understanding of how migration impacts different members, depending on gender and their life developmental stage and circumstances.

Research on migrant families should be based on different methodologies. A combination of large-scale surveys together with in-depth semi-structured interviews or focus groups with all family members would provide a more complete view on how migration impacts family life. The main difficulty with using multiple informants and multiple methodologies is that these approaches take more time and cost more. However, the richness and complexity of data will provide a deeper understanding of how international migration impacts families and societies and it is as such noteworthy and necessary in policy development.

C. FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION POLICY

Family impact analysis goes beyond basic policy evaluation research, which assesses whether or not a policy reaches its stated goals, by examining whether these goals result in positive or negative outcomes for families. While policymakers routinely review the demographic or economic impact of a policy, rarely do they consider how a policy affects families. Family impact analysis checklists are available to examine the family impact of different policies (Bogenschneider, 2006).

Family impact analysis of international migration policies can indicate the ways in which legislation is or is not supportive of family wellbeing. It can also provide feedback on the effectiveness of these policies and it can suggest revisions and improvements that might be necessary in order to achieve their desired goals. A family impact analysis of migration policies is necessary in order to understand the intended and unintended impact not only on the individual migrant but on the whole family, including spouses, children and extended family members. By considering the unintended consequences of migration policies on non-migrant individuals in the migrant household, the approach also underlines the importance of using a family perspective while developing policies designed to regulate international migration.

D. CONCLUSIONS

Using a family perspective while developing policies for regulating international migration is more effective because it considers and addresses the needs of all family members in the migrant household. The research on migrant families should be used as a scientific base in developing these policies. Creating interdisciplinary teams of policymakers and family science scholars will be helpful in this regard. Conducting family impact analysis of international migration policies is necessary in assessing the effectiveness of these policies.

NOTE

¹ The paper was prepared by Mihaela Robila, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Queens College, City University of New York.

REFERENCES

Bogensneider, Karen (2006). *Family policy matters: How policymaking affects families and what professionals can do*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Goodman, Catherine C., Philip P. Tan, Patricia Ernandes and Merrill Silverstein (2008). The health of grandmothers raising grandchildren: Does the quality of family relationships matter? *Families, Systems & Health*, vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 417-430.

Robila, Mihaela (2009). *Eastern European Immigrant Families*. New York, NY: Routledge.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development (2009). *Report of the Expert Group Meeting: Family policy in a changing world: Promoting social protection and intergenerational solidarity, Doha, Qatar, 14-16 April 2009*.