



Migration and the education of children who stay behind in Moldova and Georgia



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ABSTRACT

In Moldova and Georgia, two post-Soviet countries with high emigration rates, there is little systematic empirical research on the school performance of children whose family members migrate. This study uses nationally representative data (Moldova, N=814; Georgia, N=655) and employs child- and caregiver-reports of school performance of children living in different transnational family configurations. We found similar assessments of school performance by children and caregivers in Georgia, but results do suggest some differing perceptions in the Moldovan reports. Overall, fathers' migration, when mothers are caregivers, correspond to worsen education in Georgia. In Moldova, on the contrary, children with migrant fathers and cared for by mothers report improved school performance. Furthermore, in Moldova, better performance associates with parents being abroad, either together or divorced (child-reports) while decreased performance relates to the absence of remittances (caregiver-reports). The findings highlight the importance of considering different transnational characteristics and who makes the assessment.

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1. Introduction

Moldova and Georgia are two countries with a significant share of their populations working abroad. According to [World Bank \(2011\)](#), approximately 25.1% of the Georgian and 21.5% of the Moldovan working-age adults have left the country by 2010. Many of these migrants lack the financial resources or legal conditions to take their children with them, thus, creating a network of transnational families. In the context of labor migration, it may actually be a preferred choice for migrants not to uproot their children when proper caregiving arrangements are available back home ([Mazzucato et al., 2015](#)). This strategy is often motivated by a desire to secure the well-being of children while living apart across borders. Studies show that parents engage in migration to provide better schooling and a higher standard of living for children and other family members who stay behind ([McKenzie and Rapoport, 2011](#); [Parreñas, 2005](#)). Monetary and in-kind remittances have been found to increase the educational expenditure of the

household ([Bredl, 2010](#)), thus, creating an implicit assumption that children are the net beneficiaries of migration.

In reality, the educational outcomes of children depend not only on the economic effects of migration but also on a far more complex range of consequences surrounding the transnational care of children. Remittances may ease the financial burden of the household and provide material support for children's schooling. At the same time, the absence of family members may disrupt children's performance in school by leaving them without proper help, supervision and emotional support ([Battistella and Conaco, 1998](#); [Edwards and Ureta, 2003](#); [Kandel and Kao, 2001](#)). Therefore, migration constitutes a distinct form of separation because it simultaneously generates economic benefits and social costs for children who stay at origin ([Dreby, 2010](#)).

Indeed, previous research, mostly based on a single-country analysis, has found positive ([Antman, 2012](#); [Kandel and Kao, 2001](#)), neutral ([Cebotari and Mazzucato, 2016](#); [Jordan and Graham, 2012](#); [Robila, 2012](#)), or negative ([Cortes, 2015](#); [Grigorian and Melkonyan, 2011](#); [Hu, 2012](#); [Kroeger and Anderson, 2014](#); [Lu, 2014](#)) associations between migration of family members and children's education. The opposing evidence in the literature is nuanced by the national contextualization of results and by the measurement of transnational conditions under which children's education benefits or suffers. A cross-country comparison in this respect is

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useful because it facilitates the development of generalized conclusions and helps to broadly interpret the effects of migration on children's education.

This study builds on existing gaps in the literature that were marginally targeted by previous research. Most studies primarily consider maternal and paternal absence and the effects of remittances on children's schooling. At the same time, important transnational characteristics, such as return migration, who is the caregiver when parents migrate, the separation that involves migration and marital discord, the use of remittances, are often neglected, leading to omission of important factors mediating the effects of migration in relation to children's education. Moreover, many studies fail to consider children in non-migrant families when examining the educational performance of children in transnational care. This omission makes it difficult to understand from an academic and policy perspectives if educational outcomes of children in migrant and non-migrant families differ from each other. Finally, most of the existing research focuses on Latin American and Asian countries. To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore and compare children in migrant and non-migrant families and their school performance in two former Soviet countries.

This study uses nationally representative, large-scale household data that were collected in 2011–2012 in Moldova and Georgia. The inclusion of these two countries was motivated by the need to compare contexts that share notable similarities in the region, such as the economic difficulties following a prolonged transition to democracy, the ongoing territorial disputes that threaten the consolidation of a strong state authority, and perhaps most importantly, the large and diversified out-migration flows that affect a significant number of families in both countries. The investigation focuses on school performance using subjective measures and two perspectives: (1) that of 11–18-year-old children and (2) the child's main caregiver who resides in the household. The goals of this study are twofold. The first objective is to reveal the effects of different transnational characteristics on children's educational performance. The second objective is to observe whether and how child- and caregiver-reports converge when measuring children's education. Comparing child and adult assessments is important because the existent studies often examine one perspective or the other and discrepancies between the two will provide insights about how best to measure children's education (Jordan and Graham, 2012). Five characteristics are offered to explain the complexity of transnational family arrangements. These characteristics include whether children live in non-migrant, migrant or return-migrant households; whether parents migrate and are together or divorced; whether fathers, mothers or both migrate and children are cared for by a parent or grandparents; and whether migrants send remittances and whether remittances are prioritized for education. Understanding the complexity of transnational care arrangements is important for supporting policy actions for children living in evolving family forms such as the transnational family.

2. Background

2.1. Migration and children's education

Traditionally, the parent-child separation has been the focus of family studies that looked at extraordinary family circumstances such as parental divorce or death (Amato and Cheadle, 2005; Corak, 2001; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). This body of research draws upon child development and indicates that the main implication of child-parent separation and, therefore, the absence of parental input is that children are not living with one or both parents on a daily basis, which may inadvertently weaken

children's cognitive development and education. However, not until recently has attention been given to analyzing separations because of migration in relation to children's education.

Indeed, at the turn of the century, transnational family studies have emerged to look specifically at families that span international borders. Within this stream of research, the education of children in transnational care has become a topic of scholarly interest (Antman, 2012; Cebotari and Mazzucato, 2016; Cortes, 2015; Dreby, 2010; Jordan and Graham, 2012; Nobles, 2011). These studies indicate a wide array of factors that may influence children's education, including specifics of family environment, who the migrant is, who the caregiver is, the stability of care, communication channels, and the availability of remittances for family and educational necessities. We argue that, conceptually, it is important to distinguish between different transnational household configurations to better understand the effects of living transnationally on children's education.

A recent but growing body of research considers the ways parents contribute to children's education from outside of the household. However, parental absence may take various forms through migration, divorce or both, among which the separation that involves both migration and divorce has been particularly scarcely analyzed. In one of the few studies that looked at marital status of migrant parents in relation to children's school performance, Cebotari and Mazzucato (2016) found no differing outcomes among Ghanaian, Nigerian and Angolan children whose parents migrated abroad and were divorced compared to children in non-migrant families. In Mexico, Nobles (2011) compared parental absence due to migration and parental absence due to marital dissolution and found that children with migrant fathers showed better educational outcomes compared with children separated from their parents because of divorce. However, in the same country, Creighton et al. (2009) found that both paternal absence because of migration and paternal absence due to divorce disadvantage children in schools. The difference in the outcome between migration, divorce or both is likely explained by the rationale of these forms of absence. For migrant parents, the well-being of children motivates the decision to migrate (Nobles, 2011). In the case of divorce however, the well-being of children is not always the decisive factor for migrating. For instance, Constable (2003) found that some Filipina wives see migration as an escape route from a problematic marriage. In general, migration may strain marital relationships, especially when women migrate alone or when both partners migrate at the same time (Caarls, 2015). When divorced parents migrate, they may lack the time and resources to invest in children, especially when they remarry and have children in that union (Dreby, 2010). While the dynamics of migration and marital dissolution are hard to detach from each other, these studies point to the need to place marital discord in the context of parental migration to better understand these processes in relation to children's education.

More often than not, migration is a strategy to improve the welfare of the household and of family members who stay behind (Edwards and Ureta, 2003). This view emphasizes the role of the family in the decision to migrate. Evidence shows that households with migrants are more likely to use remittances to pay for a variety of school costs, with positive effects on children's school enrollment, school attendance and school performance (Antman, 2012; Bennett et al., 2013; Edwards and Ureta, 2003). In Moldova and Georgia, however, previous research found that education is not a priority in household spending preferences, with money being primarily used for food, clothing, health or debts (Gerber and Torosyan, 2013; UNICEF, 2016). When remittances are spent on children's education, findings from other post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, show limited improvements in children's school outcomes (Grigorian and Melkonyan, 2011;

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