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What happens to children's education when their parents emigrate? Evidence from Sri Lanka☆

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of parental emigration on the education of the children left behind in Sri Lanka. Using access to foreign employment agencies as a source of exogenous variation in parental migration, we estimated two-stage least squares models of the children's school enrolment, access to private tuition, class-age gap (the difference between a child's school year and the child's age), and educational spending. Overall, parental migration had no statistically significant effect on any of the outcomes; however, analyses by migrant gender show that the effects of parental migration were heterogeneous. When the mother migrates and the father stays behind, the education of the children worsens; when the father migrates and the mother stays behind, it improves. There is also some evidence that boys, younger children, and children of less-educated parents gain more from parental migration.

1. Introduction

Many people in developing countries like Mexico, El Salvador, India, and Sri Lanka emigrate for work and remit their income back home to their families. In 2013, 247 million people (3.5% of the world's population) were international migrants, about 40% of them from less-developed countries (United Nations, 2013; World Bank, 2015). In 2014 developing countries received US$436 billion in remittances; some of these countries received more money in remittances than in foreign aid or foreign direct investment (World Bank, 2015). Sri Lanka, for example – a country of 20 million people – has 1.9 million emigrants; they remitted US$7 billion in 2014, about 9.3% of the Sri Lankan GDP and more than one-third of its foreign exchange inflows (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2014; Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2012; Wijayaweera, 2014).

These large flows of migration and remittances raise the question of what happens to migrants' children who are left behind – a legitimate concern, given that many migrants are poor. Does migration, through remittances, relax the financial constraints faced by migrants' families and therefore improve their children's welfare? Is migration detrimental for the children's welfare because of the psychological harm caused by their parents' absence? Does it disrupt their lives (some children may have to spend more time doing household chores, taking care of their younger siblings, or working for money)?[1] Or do remittances offset the adverse effects of parental absence?

In this paper, we examine the effects of parental migration on one aspect of children's welfare in Sri Lanka: their education.[2] The case of Sri Lanka is interesting because most Sri Lankan emigrants are poor and low-skilled, and two in three are parents (Gamburd, 2000; Save the Children, 2006). Moreover, more women than men emigrate from Sri Lanka for work – this is not so in neighbouring countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Nana, 2002) – and this allows us to identify the effects of migration by migrants' gender, in particular the effects of maternal migration on the education of migrants' children. There have been policy debates in Sri Lanka recently on whether

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[1] Ginther and Pollak (2004) and Sandefur and Wells (1997), for example, found that parental absence from home adversely affects children in developed countries.

[2] We focus on the overall effects of parental migration on the education of the migrants' children, not only the effects of remittances. In the case of split migration – the type of migration we analyse in this paper – the receipt of remittances also means the absence of mothers or fathers, which may also affect children's education.

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the government should restrict female migration because of its possible adverse effects on the families left behind as well as the physical and mental abuse that some Sri Lankan women experience when they work in the Middle East (Sunday Times, 2013; Daily Mirror, 2013).

There is no consensus in the empirical literature on whether parental migration improves the education of migrants' children. The findings vary by treatment variable (whether it is migration or remittances), sample of children, and empirical strategy. Amuedo-Dorantes et al. (2010) found that remittances increase school attendance in Haiti, but they also highlighted the adverse effects migration may have on the children left behind. Cox-Edwards and Ureta (2003), Mansuri (2006), Yang (2008), and Hanson and Woodruff (2003) found that migration and remittances increase enrolment rates and years of schooling in El Salvador, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Mexico, respectively.[3] In contrast, Antman (2011) and McKenzie and Rapoport (2011) found that migration has an adverse effect on children's education in Mexico: Antman (2011) showed that Mexican children spend less time on study and more time working when their fathers migrate to the US; McKenzie and Rapoport (2011) showed that parental migration lowers the enrolment rates of migrants' children.[4] Among the few papers that have analysed the effects of parental migration by migrants' gender, Cortes (2013) found that children of migrant mothers are more likely to lag behind in school than children of migrant fathers; Intemann and Katz (2014) did not find evidence that migrants' gender matters for children's schooling and time allocation, but they did find that migrants' children complete more years of schooling.

One challenge in estimating the effects of parental migration on children's education is the endogeneity of parental migration. Parental migration and children's education may positively correlate, but this does not mean the former causes the latter: how well children do in school may induce their parents to migrate; or some other factors may cause parents to migrate and improve the children's education. That is why most researchers in this field have used instrumental variable techniques to generate exogenous variations in parental migration (i.e. variations that are uncorrelated with other determinants of children's education).[5] If an instrumental variable causes parental migration to exogenously change and does not directly affect children's education, we can use the instrument to generate an exogenous variation in parental migration. We can then examine how this exogenous variation in parental migration relates to the children's education in order to identify the effects of parental migration.

We contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we have used a new instrument: access to foreign employment agencies at the community level in Sri Lanka in the past. We show that the instrument strongly predicts current migration (the instrument is relevant); moreover, there seem to be no differences between communities where these agencies operated and those where they did not (the instrument is unlikely to affect children's education directly or through other community characteristics). We therefore identify the effects of parental migration using a new source of exogenous variation: the effects of the emigration of parents who are induced to migrate by having access to foreign employment agencies. Second, we examine the effects of parental migration by migrant gender (many papers in the literature have not examined the effects of parental migration by gender). Third, by focusing on Sri Lanka – where most migrants are low-skilled workers and most of the female migrants work as housemaids in the Middle East, with minimal protection from abuse – we also contribute to the literature by examining how children from poor households fare in school when their mothers or fathers emigrate for work.

We found some evidence that the effects of parental migration are heterogeneous. On average, parental migration has no statistically significant effect on school enrolment, access to private tuition, class-age gaps, or educational spending; but paternal migration improves the children's school enrolment and access to private education while maternal migration has the opposite effect. Paternal migration also improves the class-age gap, but we found no evidence that maternal migration does. We found no evidence that parental, maternal, or paternal migration affects educational spending.[6]

We proceed as follows. Section 2 describes the data and empirical strategy. Section 3 discusses the results and proposes mechanisms through which maternal and paternal migration affect children's education differently. Section 4 concludes.

2. Data and empirical strategy

2.1. Data

We used the Sri Lanka Integrated Survey 1999–2000, a survey representative of Sri Lanka except for the northern and eastern regions, where the then ongoing civil war disrupted data collection. The survey included 7500 households and 35,181 individuals. Because we wanted to study the effects of migration on children, we used a sample of school-age children between the ages of six and 18, which gave 7752 children: 3,893 boys and 3,859 girls.

We focused on the effects of emigration for work. There was also political migration from the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka during the survey period, but we excluded this form of migration because its effects on children's education possibly differ. Furthermore, the sample of households in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka was unrepresentative of the population.

We defined the treatment variable, *parental migration* (the migratory status of parents) as an indicator equal to one if the father or mother of a child emigrates abroad to work and zero otherwise. We also used two other treatment variables, *maternal migration* and *paternal migration*, which are indicators equal to one if the mother or father emigrates, respectively.

We used four educational outcomes: *school enrolment* status of the children, their *class-age gaps*, whether they *receive private tuition*, and the household's *spending on education*.[7] All the variables are child-level variables. We defined them as follows: (1) The *school enrolment* status of a child is an indicator equal to one if the child is currently in school and zero otherwise; (2) the *class-age gap* is the difference between a child's school year and the child's age, which is a measure of how well the child is doing in school (because most children in Sri Lanka enter primary school when they are 6 years old, the class-age gap for most children is from −4 to −5 (Arunatilake, 2006) – if they repeat grades, the class-age gap decreases); (3) whether a child *receives private tuition* is an

[3] Acosta (2011), however, did not find that remittances help older Salvadorean boys.

[4] See also Cattaneo (2012), Cuecuecha (2009), and Alcaraz et al. (2012).

[5] Yang (2008), for example, used exchange rates as an instrument for remittances. Hanson and Woodruff (2003), McKenzie and Rapoport (2011), Acosta (2011), and Mansuri (2006) used historical migration networks, while Amuedo-Dorantes et al. (2010) and Antman (2011) used employment statistics in the host countries as an instrument for remittances or migration. Cortes (2013) used demand shocks in host countries as an instrument for female migration. Intemann and Katz (2014) used wages and employment rates in the source country as instruments for migration.

[6] We therefore complement the work of Intemann and Katz (2014) in two ways: (1) we analyse the effects of parental migration on various measures of educational outcomes; and (2) we show that maternal and paternal migration affect children's education differently, similar to the findings of Cortes (2013). (Cortes used paternal migrants as the control group; we use non-migrants.)

[7] The survey had no information on other measures of outcomes, such as students' marks or whether the students repeated grades.