

TRANSNATIONAL, MULTI-LOCAL MOTHERHOOD: EXPERIENCES OF SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION AMONG LATIN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN CANADA

Prepared by the Latin American Research Group (LARG)
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The Latin American Research Group is a multi-disciplinary group composed of Dr. Judith K. Bernhard (Ryerson University), Dr. Patricia Landolt (University of Toronto), Dr. Luin Goldring (York University), and several graduate research assistants. The contact person for this report is Dr. Judith K. Bernhard (bernhard@ryerson.ca), 416-979-5000, ext. 7647. This report benefited from the support of Paola Bohórquez (York University).

Abstract

This report explores the experiences of Latin American families who have faced separation and reunification during their migration process to Canada by examining the particular situations of 40 mothers. In particular, it focuses on how mother-child relationships and family networks are transformed by transnational, multi-local family structures and it highlights several barriers to the mothers' utilization of social services. The report calls for recognition of the needs of transnational families in Canada and offers concrete recommendations to policy makers, service providers, and families with an aim to easing the difficulties of separation and reunification.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Canada, as in other countries, several generations of researchers and policymakers have considered migrants as people who uproot themselves and begin the stages of incorporation into a new society. With respect to families, researchers have tended to look at intact family units. Where not intact, a reunification process or some kind of integration has been assumed. However, the intact family model does not always hold. Families who are spread out across nation states and whose lives cross national borders are known in the social science literature as “transnational” or “multi-local” families.

The contemporary challenges of family reunification have been documented in a well-publicized Canadian Council for Refugees report entitled, “More than a Nightmare: Delays in Refugee Family Reunification” (CCR, 2004a). In this report, attention is given to the toll exacted on families when there are long periods of separation between children and parents. The CCR report states that the “UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has criticized Canada for its failure to reunite refugee families expeditiously ... the Committee feels that its concerns have not been adequately addressed” (p. 4). As the CCR report makes clear, this failure is occurring despite the fact that Canadian human rights are legally and constitutionally guaranteed. In addition, a second CCR report, “Impacts on Children of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act” (CCR, 2004b), states that despite Canada’s commitment to protect children by signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the length of separation may be even longer for refugee children who “can only apply for residence for themselves and cannot include their parents and siblings” (p. 10). The Convention calls on states to deal with applications for family reunification in a positive, humane and expeditious manner (Ayotte, 2001; Brouwer, 2004; UN, 1990). In order to address the delays experienced by refugees in being reunited with their families, there are currently calls for Canada to immediately grant permanent resident status to individuals whose inland refugee claims have been approved (Brouwer, 2004; CPJ, 2005). Another challenge to family reunification is that Regulation 117 (9) (d) of the IRPA states that only those family members who were listed as dependents and medically examined at the time of the permanent residence application can be sponsored to come to Canada (Government of Canada, 2004). This means that children who were not listed as dependents on the initial application are not eligible for sponsorship by their mothers.

Over the last few years, research on transnational, multi-local families has increased, providing information on a population that is *not* well known to policymakers, service providers, or society at large. The present report joins the emerging literature on transnational families. It documents the experience of selected Latin American

families in Southern Ontario, providing one of the few studies on transnational, multi-local families from Latin America available in Canada. To emphasize an important point, these families fall into a number of categories with respect to migration status of parents or children. For the purposes of this investigation, however, these sub-groups were mainly not distinguished.

Family dispersal

Mothers and children may experience separation for many different reasons, including the pursuit of education or employment or a change in the family relationship due to illness, divorce, interfamilial conflict or child welfare concerns. This study examines separation that occurs in relation to the migration process. It is crucial to emphasize that transnational families are not “deficient” or “defective” family units simply because they do not conform to the traditional model of the nuclear and single-site family. According to a 2005 UN report, about 90 million women live outside their countries of origin, accounting for almost half of international migration. This report reviews a particular set of cases of Latin American women, either living on their own or with a spouse, who experienced separation from their children as a result of migration to Canada. Such separations may have occurred for a number of reasons, including, for example: situations in which there have been delays in the processing of the spouse’s arrival; situations in which spouses have come to Canada and then returned home because of not having their credentials recognized; and situations in which one parent has returned home but the rest of the family has stayed in Canada in order to avoid the stigma of “not making it in Canada.”

Some of the separations were transitory in that the children were being brought to Canada one by one over a number of years. For others, the process may never be completed. If too much time has passed, some of the remaining children may no longer want to migrate. In many cases, the reunification process resulted in a breakdown of the established parent-child relationship and perpetuated the situation of a family with members in two or more countries. The study cases indicate that families do not become transnational, multi-local families because they consider that a desirable strategy. On the contrary, Canadian immigration policies, political and economic processes in the country of origin, household level inter-personal conflict and abuse, family economic resources, and available information about Canada lead to, and in some cases perpetuate, the geographic dispersal of family members. This dispersal comes at a high emotional cost, particularly for children (Levitt, 2001). Family dispersal may also generate feelings of continuous instability. Indeed Brouwer (2004) claims “the newcomer community does not consider anyone settled until their family is (in Canada)” (p. 14).

Social service providers and educational organizations have not adequately dealt with the broader and long-term effects of family dispersal. There has been a lack of investigation using even the most basic social indicators of the children's well-being and health. This report is concerned with educational and social welfare policy reform that may assist such families.

Challenges of the immigration and settlement process

Over the last decade, the focus and priorities of Canada's immigration system have shifted from a primary focus on family immigration and long-term settlement, towards an emphasis on high-end professional immigration. At the low-end, there have been efforts to facilitate entry of temporary migrant workers (Reitz, 2005). Canada, however, maintains its reputation as an immigrant-friendly country and newcomers do not accurately perceive what may be the difficulties of resettlement.

Besides listing abstract categories of difficulty, it is important to review, as we do here, cases of actual families. This attention to concrete family realities is the only way to appreciate the complexities of the situation. Contributing to the difficulties of the families on the side of the government are problematic regulations and procedures. As well, there are gaps in services. There has been inadequate monitoring of the settlement process and of its frequent difficulties. There are no routine or matter-of-course assessments of social or educational welfare. The schools, in particular, treat children of transnational, multi-local families as any other migrant child and no problems are assumed or investigated prior to obvious symptoms and perceived negative behaviour which comes to the attention of school authorities (see Bernhard et. al, 2004 on the effect of "zero tolerance" type legislations).

The lack of proper documentation and full legal or immigrant status was a recurring theme among our respondents. For the transnational, multi-local families we interviewed, a particular issue was the eligibility of children for childcare, education, and medical insurance¹. We discuss below the social costs for migrant families of the current policies, many of which make it impossible for children to have access to basic services. In particular, we look at situations where reunification is made even more difficult by the lack of access to services.

¹ The children of temporary residents are currently required to pay fees of \$7,000 to \$10,000 per year in order to register for public school in Ontario. On 4 May 2005, Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy announced changes to the legislation that would exempt those children whose parents have applied for permanent resident status from having to pay this annual fee (Government of Ontario, 2005).

Along with some other transnational families, refugees may fail to avail themselves of services and facilities even where available. Refugees in particular are often traumatized and/or are living in a state of extreme fear and apprehension. Some believe that the wisest course of action is to keep an almost zero profile, not only avoiding government officials, but also social workers, legal aid, or school officials. Being almost underground, the children often fail to access the most basic services such as healthcare, childcare, and after-school and summer programs.

Besides the fears newcomers arrive with, there are other sources of fear once they are in Canada. The English and ethnic press often focus on the dangers of childcare centres and the issue of vulnerability to crime. Child molesters are greatly feared in a way that is out of proportion to the actual number of incidents. It would appear that a number of factors contribute to the fears of newcomers and keep them huddled with their immediate family in a self-protective and overly isolated cocoon.

The Canadian context

Although the proportion of refugees accepted has remained fairly constant at 10% to 11% of all newcomers to Canada, the situation of high demand around the world and the backlog in processing applications here means that: a) it takes longer for refugee applicants to become landed and sponsor family members; and b) many people are rejected and end up in a situation of living with less-than-full legal status (Status Campaign, 2004a, 2004b). Similarly, there are difficulties for other categories of immigrants as shown by government statistics. For instance, the lag time for finalizing applications for Family Class dependent children ranges from 18 months to two or more years. For Africa and the Middle East, 20% of applications are still not finalized after two years. It is important to note that these timeframes do not reflect the total time of family separation, only the processing time of the applications. Visa students, landed immigrants, and refugees from within are also affected (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005; Coates & Hayward, 2004; CPJ, 2005; Brouwer, 2004).

Given this context, an understanding of transnational, multi-local families in Canada through a family-focused analysis of migration systems becomes crucial. There are reasons why policymakers have not paid much attention to transnational families in many countries. In Canada, the well-known “friendliness” to family reunification often leads policymakers to assume that things are on track and the required services are already in place.

Much of the literature on transnationalism is “situated” within a U.S. or European context of reception. Yet it is critical to consider the specificity of the Canadian

context of reception. Key differences have to do with Canadian immigration policy and the “warmth of the welcome” experienced by the newcomers in this country (Reitz, 1998). With the exception of special temporary worker programs and investor programs, we assume that since the 1960s and 1970s, Canada accepts complete families or facilitates eventual reunification.

Aside from the recent establishment of the Metropolis project, most investigations have focused on the immigration process itself and little attention has been paid to longer-term settlement issues. Within a general lack of settlement studies, there is a particular dearth of work on dispersed migrant families. In the United States, the label “transnational” family began to appear in research about 10 years ago (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

There is a deeply embedded belief among our respondents that Canada, in contrast to the U.S. or Europe, is a place to which complete families can migrate or where speedy reunification will be facilitated. The prevalence of this idea may have contributed to the relative dearth of research on dispersed immigrant families in Canada. A lack of relevant secondary data has also limited such research.

Expectations of motherhood

The problem is particularly evident for Latin American families because certain Latin American countries such as Colombia, Mexico, and Costa Rica are now represented among the top ten countries of refugee claimants (Immigration and Refugee Board, 2005). The adaptation process for Latin American transnational families has its own peculiar characteristics. One of the key issues is related to social norms regarding the status and duties of mothers in families. In effect, the mother has primary responsibility in many areas related to the child, and this cannot be reassigned to others. This is true in a number of other cultures as well. To put it differently, where transfers of care from the mother to others have occurred, the mother is disapproved of socially and stigmatized. Even in cases where the relatives in the home country are initially supportive of her migration, the mother suffers because she herself believes she has fallen short of her duties. The devotion of Latin American mothers has been celebrated and often stereotyped. In the present circumstances however, the norm of devotion gives rise to a number of problematic situations and a great deal of distress in the mothers. As pointed out by Salazar Parreñas in her 2001 study of Philippine mothers, there is an important ideological component to the representation of “good mothering” that exacerbates the already difficult experience of separation:

The responsibility for emotional care remains with women even in families with fathers who provide a tremendous amount of emotional care to their children and mothers who give a great deal of maternal care. It is true that feelings of pain in the transnational families are fostered by separation; however, they are undoubtedly intensified by the failure in a great number of families to meet the gender-based expectations of children for mothers (and not fathers) to nurture them and also the self-imposed expectations of mothers to follow culturally and ideologically inscribed duties in the family (Salazar Parreñas, 2001, p. 387).

In their study of 385 early adolescents from several countries who had immigrated to the U.S., Suarez-Orozco, Todorova & Louie (2002) gave extensive consideration to the effects of separation on the children within a framework of attachment theory. Although the patterns were not consistent across countries, they reported that “85% of the participants had been separated from one or both parents for extended periods” (p. 625). In looking at the effects of separation, Suarez-Orozco and her team drew attention to the widespread depressive symptoms among the children. While it was not their main focus, they also drew attention to the effects on the parents of these children, in particular sadness and alienation, because of separation. Glasgow & Gouse-Sheese (1995) found that a recurring theme in the separation-reunification process experienced by Caribbean children who had immigrated to Canada was a sense of rejection and abandonment by their mothers.

Transnational mothers also have to deal with the demands that arise from extended families, from partners, and often from the children themselves, to successfully perform their “maternal duties.” Their parenting is carried out without support and commonly a lack of access to childcare services.

Initiatives to support families

There have been some rather successful attempts on a small scale to deal with these problems and they are worth noting. Several were projects of very limited time periods.

- Citizenship and Immigration, Ontario, funds the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS and SEPT) programs in partnership with local school boards. Its main goal is to facilitate the integration of newcomer students and their families in their school and communities. There are 8 Settlement Workers in the Schools programs in Ontario, with 13 community agencies and 15 school boards involved in the program. Between September 1, 2003 and April 30, 2004, there were 25,794

service sessions of information provided, including language training, employment, housing, and immigration aid.

- Various immigrant-serving organizations offer services to Latin American communities in Southern Ontario. The services provided by these organizations include legal aid, information on how to deal with the immigration system and file applications, counselling, support groups, referral to other organizations and services and, in some instances, assistance in cases of domestic violence against women. The community-based organization SISO (Settlement and Integration Services Organization) provides information and legal orientation for families in process of reunification. Located in Hamilton, SISO serves a large community of Latin American immigrants and refugees. Under the guidance of Ms. Maria Antelo, a group of family members has met on a monthly basis, has written briefs to government organizations and lobbied for mothers who are suffering trauma due to the complexity of their situations.
- In Toronto in 2002, the Reunification and Adaptation Project (RAP) was set up as part of the Toronto department of Public Health. It aimed to set up peer-support among 20 ethnic communities. Workshops were offered on the immigration and reunification process, and peer counsellors provided information support and referrals. The 30 staff members were able to involve almost 8,000 participants and conducted 263 workshops. As of December 2004, funding for the project ceased.
- St. Christopher House in Toronto runs the Community Parent Outreach Program (CPOP), which helps to connect newcomer or isolated families with at least one child under the age of 6 to needed services and resources.
- Christian churches of various denominations often constitute an important link between the newcomers and the community by providing resources and information about housing, schooling, English lessons and job opportunities. Some churches also provide legal aid.
- In Malinalco, Mexico, Proyecto El Rincón (the Corner Project) has run an educational resource centre since 1998, and is looking to expand the educational and psychological support it provides to the left-behind children of migrants. The project coordinator is currently seeking funding in order to expand programs for children of migrants, including

facilitating communication and strengthening ties between children and their parents abroad. In order to strengthen the sense of the community as an extended family, the project involves and trains community members in program delivery rather than bringing in outside professionals.

Although there is recognition of the pressing needs of immigrants, many organizations work with very limited resources. In addition, the lack of coordination between organizations and agencies produces unnecessary duplication of services in some areas while providing no support or insufficient support in others.² It is worth noting that these service providers often try to protect newly arrived immigrants from falling prey to immigration advisers who promise help but do not always deliver, or do so at great financial cost.

Purposes of this report

This report is set up to look at a number of social and psychological issues that arise when a family is separated and is in a “transnational” configuration. The mode of entry and official status of migrants in transnational families has not followed the expectations of policymakers. A husband-absent scenario is well known in migration studies but migrants and policymakers do not often contemplate patterns of longstanding mother-child separation.

This report is intended to provide first-hand accounts of the experiences of families caught in this vulnerable situation. The intent is to spur policymakers to give more attention to these families and to the ways in which they might be helped. Since there have been successful interventions, models do exist for dealing with these problems and this report wishes to draw attention to them. New programming will not have to start from zero and without previous experience. The report is also directed to the families that participated in the project, the institutions that work with them, researchers, and non-governmental organizations. It outlines our findings in the area of family separation and reunification in the context of transnational migration, emphasizing the structural conditions that make reunification unnecessarily difficult or even impossible for some families (see also Bernhard, Landolt, & Goldring, 2004). The report also includes a series of recommendations

² There is a recognized problem regarding access to employment by immigrants who do not have professional or labour market contacts, as well as an absence of programs to help new immigrants validate their credentials. Recent work by the Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT) and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) has begun to address the challenges faced by skilled immigrants whose credentials are not being recognized (PROMPT, 2005; Toronto Star, March 12, 2005).

for Canadian immigration and refugee law and policy makers, concrete suggestions for the families to help them cope with long separations, and useful references in the area of transnational, multi-local families.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research project was set up to address the following research questions:

1. What are the common configurations of transnational families with members in Canada?
2. How are bonds and emotional connections maintained, and what are the impacts on children before and after migration and reunification?
3. What are the pressures on and changes in the role of mothers?
4. What are the patterns of change of authority in transnational, multi-local families and what are their effects on children?
5. What do the mothers' experiences suggest about their awareness of services and ability (and willingness) to utilise them?

3. HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

The study is based on 40 one-on-one interviews conducted by first-language Spanish speakers. The women had been in Canada for at least a year, had been their children's primary caregivers until the point of migration, and had experienced separation from their children due to the migration process. The participants were gathered through a multiple-point snowball referral process from a number of immigrant-serving organizations and churches. The respondents do not constitute a random sample. The 40 women-headed families came from the following 6 countries: Colombia (10), Costa Rica (6), Guatemala (5), El Salvador (7), Ecuador, (6) and Mexico (6).

The process of migration in these multi-local family networks was in most of the cases a very difficult and painful experience that would continue to have repercussions for years to come. We therefore redesigned the interview guide so that some information was captured in closed questions, but we also gave respondents opportunities to talk in an open-ended manner. Responses to the open-ended questions were later transcribed.

We turned to immigrant-serving agencies and churches to recruit participants. In talking to clergy and service providers it became obvious that there is a significant number of women separated from their children, yet they were either fearful, ashamed of speaking, or did not want to discuss such private and painful matters.

We decided then to participate in church activities and ceremonies, and in each case, were introduced to the communities by priests or pastors. Clearly, many potential informants felt safer and more trusting when their churches supported our project and encouraged their participation.

The churches proved to be of fundamental importance in building the sample in yet another way. Latin-American migrants in Toronto are geographically dispersed and they may change residence frequently, but the church remains as a crucial gathering place that provides a stable sense of community.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE MOTHERS IN THE STUDY

Although our sample was small and heterogeneous, we found certain trends in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The most striking findings in terms of the sample characteristics are the new streams of immigrant sending countries, such as Costa Rica and Mexico, the multiple ways of entry, and the fact that 15 of the 40 informants cited domestic violence as a reason for leaving their countries.

Ages: The women's ages upon arrival in Canada ranged from 19 to 45 years with a mean of 32.4 years. At the time of the interviews, 14 women were between 25 and 34 years of age, 20 were 35-45 years and 6 were over 45 years of age. The children's ages at the time of initial separation ranged from four months to 11 years of age. Fifteen of the children were under one year, 10 were between 1 and 2, 11 were between 3 and 5 years of age, and four between 7 and 11 years. It is important to note that the mothers were in their prime reproductive ages when they migrated and that their children were quite young.

Migration history: Most women left their countries owing to a context of social exclusion and limited economic opportunities in their home country. This decision often dovetailed with crises in their lives. When we asked about their reasons for migrating we were deeply affected by finding that one third of the sample (N=15) said they were escaping from situations of domestic violence. The rest of the respondents came to Canada in situations of underlying political violence and general situations of crime and public insecurity in the sending country (N=23). A small minority (N=2) listed economic difficulties as the main reason for migrating. Fifteen of the women also cited family and personal matters as reasons for migration. The decision to migrate was generally taken in consultation with their extended families.

Entry to Canada and immigration status: It was our expectation that the manner of entrance of the women would have been through temporary visas, work programs or family reunification programs. In fact, the respondents had used a range of methods to enter Canada. Twelve of the women had already spent time in Canada and entered as permanent residents. About one third (13) came as refugee claimants. The rest were sponsored or came as tourists and students. It is important to note that the women used a variety of methods of entry. In contrast to, for instance, Filipino and West Indian transnational mothers who have a long tradition of migration to Canada under the domestic caregiver program, we did not find people in our sample who came with offers of employment. Only three came because their spouses were already in the country.

Education and professional qualifications: The participants' educational backgrounds were heterogeneous. Four had no or little education, 19 had secondary or vocational school, and 17 had post-secondary education. We found that independent of their educational background and professional experience, most of them were performing cleaning jobs or were unwilling welfare recipients.

5. FINDINGS³

a) Reasons for migration and separation

One of the main reasons behind “the choice” of migrating to Canada was the idea that the migrant families would not have to separate or would be quickly reunited. In all cases, the separation was thought of as a short-term situation and reunification as a sure outcome.

Me fui a vivir a los Estados Unidos un año y vi que era muy difícil, muy difícil la traída de mis hijos porque ninguno tiene visa. Me contaron que en Canadá es más rápido y digo yo “bueno, listo, me voy para Canadá para que nos juntemos” (Caso 25).

I went to live in the United States for a year and saw it was very difficult to bring my children because they did not have a visa. People said that in Canada it was faster, so I said, “Okay, I’m going to Canada so that the family can be reunited” (Case 25).

The dynamics of separation between the mothers and their children are difficult to categorize because of the complex migration history of each family. There were many situations in which people went back and forth between the home country, Canada and the United States. This is illustrated in the case of Mrs. Gina (Case 17) who reported having to divorce her husband because of his violent temper. After some time, two of her three children had been visiting their father in Canada for a one-year period while she stayed in the home country with the youngest son. When she found out that the children had been apprehended by the Children’s Aid Society, she flew to Toronto to get the children and was able to obtain a restraining order against the children’s father. She was not, however, given custody of the children, so was not able to obtain passports for them to leave without the father’s permission. Ironically, her youngest son was not given a passport in the home country because the father’s signature was a requirement. At the time of the interview, Mrs. Gina and her two children had not seen the youngest boy for almost one year.

There were some situations in which the children stayed alone in the home country, managing their own affairs without plans for reunification. This was the case for Mrs. Romero, whose husband escaped their home country after being threatened. She discussed the situation with her children aged 9, 12, and 16 and they all decided

³ The names of participants are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

that they would care for themselves in the family home while she went north to make money. This would allow the family to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. In most cases, the mothers had to leave the children in their home countries because the journey was seen as dangerous and requiring a fast pace (N=7) or because the children did not have legal documents to leave the home countries or enter Canada (N=14). Once the parents were able to secure legal status, the expense of bringing the children became yet another, almost insurmountable obstacle (N=3). While some mothers had time to plan and make preparations for their migration, others had to leave hastily and almost secretly, particularly in cases where they feared for their personal security.

In some cases, what at first seemed to be financial restrictions that impeded the reunification of the family turned into legal obstacles and limitations that made reunification consistently drawn out and next to impossible. There were many cases where children of earlier or later marriages were not named on official application documents.

En ese tiempo mi mamá vivía en Ottawa y me pidió solo con la niña y quedaron mis otros dos hijos allá. Mi mamá, como ya me había metido los papeles como soltera, temía que me iban a rechazar o se iba a tardar el procedimiento para venirse, y ella pensó que ella iba a pagar un dineral aquí para pedirme con todos los niños. Entonces ella me dijo: “Te vienes tu con la niña primero y en menos de un año te vas a traer a los otros niños” (Caso 3).

At that time, my mother was living in Ottawa, and she applied for me to come with my daughter only, so my two other sons stayed there. Since my mother had already put in the application for me as a single (not married) applicant, she was afraid that they would reject me or that it would take a much longer time, and she thought she would have to pay a fortune to request me with all of the children. So she said to me, “You come first with the girl, and in less than a year you can bring the boys” (Case 3).

There were a few cases where the child was sent ahead to Canada for reasons of unrest in the home country, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss those data. In some cases, the separation became permanent; in others, the mother eventually rejoined the children.

b) Size and spatial organization of the family network

The women were part of extended family networks across countries that involved the regular circulation of goods, resources, individuals and information across nation states. A majority had close family members with whom they communicated regularly, not only in the home countries but also in the United States, thus highlighting the multi-locality of contemporary immigrant families.

When asked to name their closest family members, persons in all three countries were named. In 14 cases, 7 names were given as closest family members. Ten respondents cited 6 people and 9 named 5 (see Table 1). Often migration was a process carried out in stages with family members coming one by one. Participants spent years in the U.S. and had left family members who settled along the way.

Table 1: People in their immediate family network

Number of Persons	Frequency	Percent
2	1	2.5
3	4	10
4	2	5
5	9	22.5
6	9	22.5
7	14	35
8	1	2.5
TOTAL	40	100

New information communication technologies and low prices had spurred a burst of activity in these families. Many had cell phones, phone cards, Internet access, Webcams and carried out international conversations routinely. It is not too much to say that the extended family networks in Canada, the U.S. and the migrant-producing countries were vitally energized by these means.

While separated, most of the children were cared for by their grandparents (N = 22), their fathers (N =10), other relatives, or friends and neighbours (N=7). In one case, the children stayed alone in the family home with the supervision of two aunts who lived within a 15-minute drive (see Figure 1).

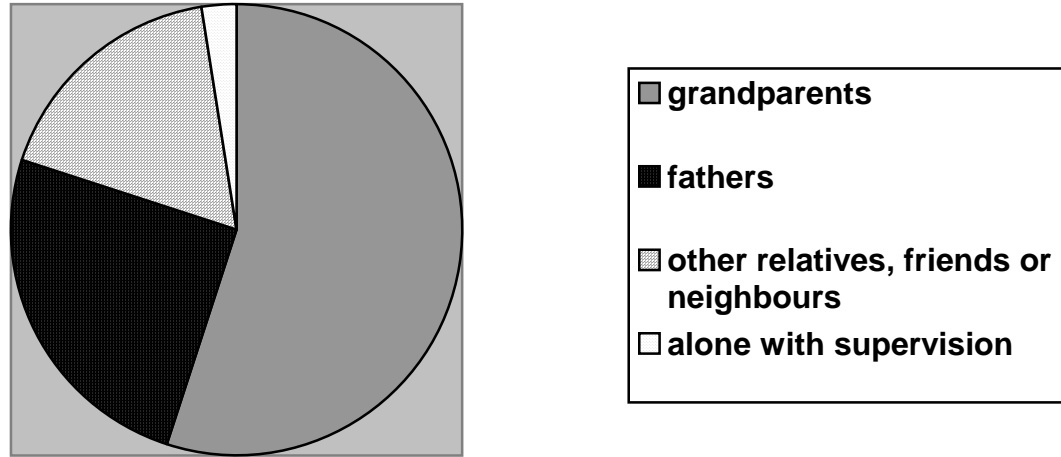


Figure 1: Care providers during mother-child separation

c) Length of separation

At the time of the interviews, half the families had already been reunited with their children and half were still separated (see Table 2). The typical length of separation was between 3 months and 5 years. In 4 of the cases, the separations lasted longer: between 6 and 8 years. The families with the longest separations were from Ecuador, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Table 2: Duration of mother-child separation, by eventual reunification

Duration of separation	Mother reunified with children		Total
	No	Yes	
2-6 months	0	1	1
7-12 months	8	4	12
13-25 months	7	3	10
3-5 yrs	5	8	13
6-8 yrs	0	4	4
Total	20	20	40

The processing times for visa applications vary significantly depending on the posts from which the applications are filed (CIC, 2005). Our data show that in many cases, the families had been separated for long periods of time before filing the applications.

In a number of cases the process was such that reunification was no longer an expected outcome. This was the case with the mothers of adolescent children who had already assumed economic and self-directing responsibilities when the parents were absent. They had formed new networks of support and their decisions about career planning, sexual activity and normative behavior were no longer discussed with their mothers. In fact, a new family configuration had formed which was only recognized after the fact by the mothers.

d) Mothers' feelings about separations from their children

The experiences of the mothers, starting with the decision to migrate, during the period of separation, and during the process of reunification, were overwhelmingly marked by feelings of depression and hopelessness. As Figure 2 shows, 29 of the 40 mothers interviewed reported feeling constantly sad. When asked to describe their feelings during the time of separation, 15 of the 40 mothers reported being very depressed, 9 had difficulty functioning and 4 felt hopeless and saw no meaning in life.

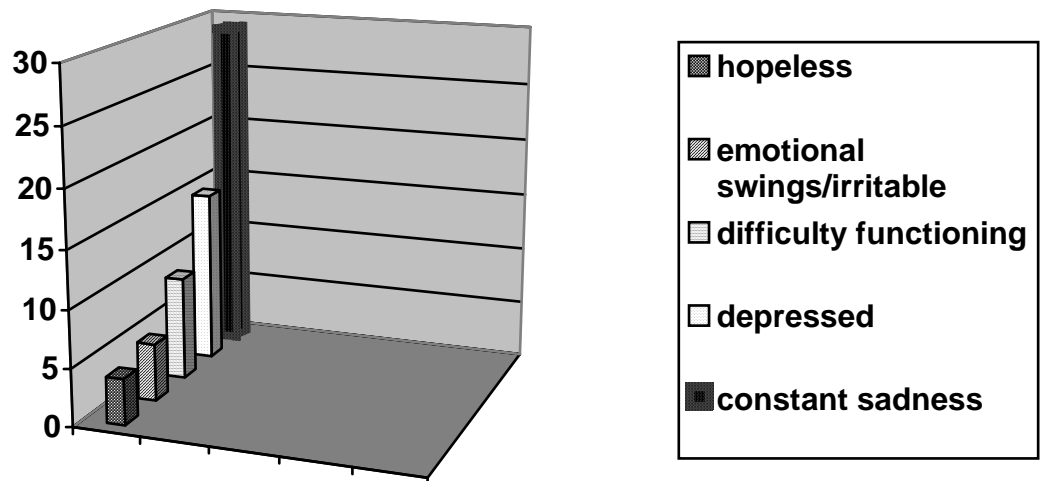


Figure 2: Feelings during separation

There were episodes of deep emotion in almost all of the interviews. A vast majority of interviewees cried at some point.

Mis sentimientos, fue una cosa bien terrible. Mucha depresión, llorar, tristeza. Trabajaba mucho. Trabajaba mucho porque llegaba y yo me ponía a llorar sola porque yo decía “mi niño.” Veía a los niños en la calle, yo no sabía como estaba él. Yo sabía que él estaba bien, pero el hecho de no verlo... Yo sabía que iba creciendo. Me empezó a pesar mas y mas con el paso del tiempo. Lo único que nos ayudó es que íbamos a la iglesia y allí compartíamos con muchas familias que estaban en la misma situación y nos animábamos los unos a los otros diciendo que tuviéramos paciencia (Caso 29).

My emotions were terrible (upsetting) for me. A lot of depression, crying, and sadness. I worked a lot. I worked a great deal because I would come home and cry alone, calling out for my son. I would see children in the street, and I didn't know how *he* was. I knew he was in good hands, but it was the fact that I couldn't see him. I knew he was growing. It started to weigh more on me as time passed. The only thing that helped was going to church. There, there were a lot of families in the same situation, and we supported each other, and told each other to be patient (Case 29).

A participant in the Suarez-Orozco (2002) study reported similar feelings:

I was a single mother and there we were at war. I talked it over with my mother and she told me that maybe things would go better on “the other side.” It was very hard above all to leave the children when they were so small. I would go into the bathroom of the gas station and milk my breasts that overflowed, crying for my babies (p. 635).

The mothers in our study also talked about their guilt at not being able to take care of the day-to-day emotional needs of the children.

A lo mejor cuando yo les hablo de soledad es por eso, porque a lo mejor si converso yo mucho, y hablo, converso. Pero la soledad en sí es porque yo estaba muy acostumbrada a vivir la vida con mis hijos. El núcleo familiar fué para mi lo más importante, lo más importante que pudo haber en la vida. Y de pronto llorar y desmoronarse así, de un momento a otro acabarse todo, en el sentido de separación.

Pero es duro...a veces uno se siente culpable. Dios mío, si valdría la pena haberme venido. Si valdría la pena haber viajado, dejado tres niños, ¿o es que solamente estoy poniendo como importante la plata? ¿O es que solamente estoy poniendo como importante mejor estar aquí? ¿Y la calidad humana y el respeto? ¿Y la familia entonces, en que quedó? Son preguntas que uno se hace constantemente (Caso 15).

Maybe this is why I talk to them so much about being lonely, because maybe I do talk a lot. But I am lonely because I was so used to living my life with my children. The family nucleus was the most important thing for me. The most important thing in the world. And to all of a sudden come to be dismantled like this, from one day to the next it is all over and we are separated... It is hard... sometimes I feel guilty and ask myself if it was all worth it, if it was really worth it to come here leaving three children behind, or is it that only money is important? Or is it only important to be here? And what about human values and respect? What is the place of family then? These are questions that I ask myself all the time (Case 15).

The mothers viewed the separations from their children as breaking a cultural norm and depriving their children of something that could not be replaced. Since two-thirds of them had faced spousal abuse, the stigma was even deeper because many blamed themselves for having provoked the men and for breaking their marriage vows.

e) Transformation and reconstitution in family networks

The process of migration shifted the power balance and, in general, gave children more power than they had vis-à-vis adults in their home countries. Also, separations often lead to a reconfiguration of family networks.

In cases of extended separations, it was not uncommon to find that a new family had been created in Canada. We heard a number of stories of children who arrived and found one or two half siblings and were jealous and angry. The same anger was expressed by children who had been left behind when the parent emigrated with only one of the siblings. A mother from Guatemala who had been separated from her children for six years described her experiences:

Se ponían bien extraños, no querían comer y me decían que les hiciera la comida que la abuelita les hacía. Bueno dejé que me dijeran de todo para yo ganármelos. Siempre querían dormir en el mismo cuarto los dos, y todavía son así juntitos ellos

dos. No se llevan con mi hija grande. Decían que yo la quería mas a ella, porque yo la traje y dicen que yo fui mala. Esa palabra me ha costado quitárselas. Que yo fui mala porque yo los dejé. El no comía cuando yo me sentaba en la mesa con ellos. Era bien difícil porque yo incluso llegué a pensar, ¿para qué me los traje? (Caso 3).

They would act strange, they did not want to eat, and they said they wanted me to cook the way their grandmother did. I let them say all kinds of things to me so that I could win them over. They always slept in the same room, the two of them, and they are still like that. They don't get along with my oldest daughter. They said I loved her more because I brought her, and they said I was bad. It has been difficult to get them to stop saying things like that. That I was bad because I left them. He did not want to eat when I sat at the table with them, it was difficult and I even started thinking, why did I bring them? (Case 3).

In summary, there were permanent splits and separations that took their toll on parents and children. On the other hand, where reunifications occurred, this was often the beginning of new difficulties more than the resolution of the old ones. We found parents who were quite aware of such potential difficulties and were deterred from attempting reunifications when long periods of time had passed and the children were settled in the home country. Indeed Schmalzbauer (2004) indicates that in some cases children who have been cared for by alternative caregivers, or *other-mothers*, may come to consider these women their *real* mothers or even forget who their bloodmothers are.

The mothers, of necessity, felt they had to relinquish a number of functions including discipline, and decisions around health and education. In most cases, grandparents or other caregivers took on these decisions (see Figure 3). Of particular importance was the issue of parental authority and control. In some cases, there was no adult during the time of separation who was willing and able to step in. The grandparents and other caregivers provided basic love, food, and shelter; however, they provided less guidance and discipline than was expected by the mothers and did not take on parent-like authority. In other cases, the caregivers exercised some control but were inclined to spoil and indulge the children.

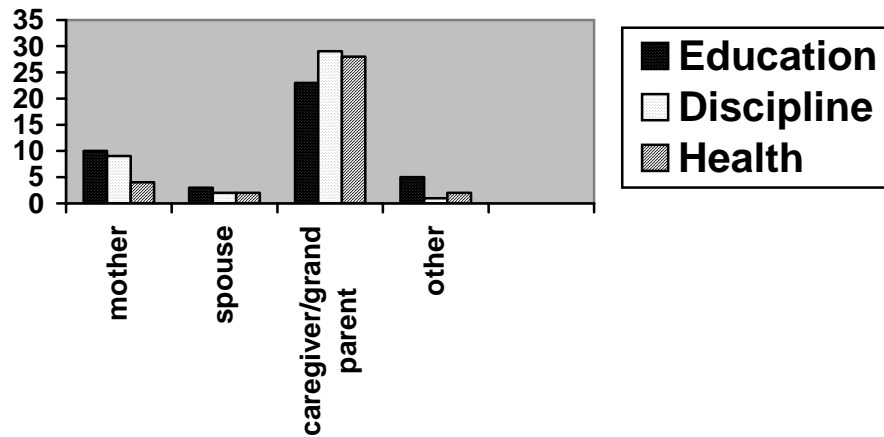


Figure 3: Main decision-maker on education, discipline and health issues during separation

Mis padres son los que están tratando a mi niño porque yo estoy tan lejos y estoy tan alejada en distancia que yo no veo lo que él hace a diario. Mis padres me comentan y me dicen “sabes qué? pasó esto; hagamos así.” Ellos por no darme problemas con cosas más sencillas no me decían nada. Cosas muy sencillas como que mi hijo todas las noches lloraba (Caso 31).

My parents are the ones that are dealing with my child because I am so far away that I don’t see the day to day. My parents say, “Let’s do this in this way.” They don’t want to give me problems, so they don’t tell me the little things, little things like that my son used to cry every night before falling asleep (Case 31).

The relatives, in their position of being interposed between mother and child, were in effect displacing the mothers. Indeed they had reportedly come to consider the children as their own and wanted to protect them from being upset. In such cases, the relatives bring about a lessening or ending of the mothers’ direct emotional connections.

Preservation of emotional ties can be handled well, but often due to infrequency of contact and lack of daily input, estrangement became a difficulty if reunification occurred. The sheer quantity of contact is not made up for by quality time. Mrs. Norma (Case 30) told us about the process of reunification with her son after being separated for three years.

Yo sentí como que estaba abrazando a un sobrino, o como que estaba yo viendo a un sobrino, pero no a mi hijo porque lo sentí tan diferente. El era diferente, su pensamiento, su forma de comportarse. Al principio le dió gusto y después estaba como enojado. “¿Por que me dejaste?” “¿Por que no venías pronto?” Porque yo pensé que mi trámite iba a ser un año. Yo le dije “en un año voy a estar contigo.” Pero se tardó 3 años. Levanta la voz. Entonces me dijo “¿por qué me dejaste?” Un extraño pero un extraño que estaba enojado es lo que encontré (Caso 30).

I felt like I was hugging a nephew, or that I was looking at a nephew, but not my own child. He was different, his thoughts, his way of behaving. At first he was happy, but then he was angry. “Why did you leave me? Why did you take so long?” I had thought my paperwork would take a year. I told him, “In one year I’ll be with you.” But it took three years. So he said, “Why did you leave me?” I found not only a stranger, but an angry stranger (Case 30).

Another reason for estrangement was the frequent breakdown of direct telephone contacts. The cases we are referring to involve children who were unable or unwilling to come to the phone or whose relatives insisted on taking messages rather than letting mothers talk directly to their children.

The children had experiences of settlement different from those of their parents because they had another ruptured attachment to deal with. The children’s attachments to the new primary caregivers in the countries of origin were sometimes so strong that upon reunification with the mothers in Canada the children yearned for the second caregivers (e.g., the grandmothers, aunts). Where it was not possible for the child to be with the new caregivers, the reunification with the mothers represented the second rupture of attachment. This dual experience of loss is also documented by Glasgow and Gouse-Sheese (1995) in their work with Caribbean children who had been separated from their mothers for several years before being reunited in Canada. The consequences of this pattern remain to be investigated in the present cases. It is well known however, that children show a number of negative effects or difficulties from a succession of broken attachments (Carlson, 1998; Levy & Orlans, 1998; Rutter, 1971).

Cuando se separó de sus abuelos el niño, y mi mamá me lo entregó en el aeropuerto, el niño se agarraba de mi mamá y decía “no.” Y mi mamá se vino a quedar conmigo 2 semanas para decirme como vivía con el niño. Pero cuando mi mamá se fue ahí empezó el lío. Que la buscaba, que me enseñaba las fotos de ella, que me preguntaba por mis hermanos. Me decía “y tu quien eres?” Y yo le digo “soy tu

mamá.” Y me decía “no, mi mamá no, tú no eres.” Y me enseñaba las fotos de mi mamá y me decía “ella es mi mamá” (Caso 29).

When he separated from his grandparents, my mother gave him to me at the airport, and the boy was clinging to her and saying, “No.” My mother came to stay with me for 2 weeks to show me how they had been living. But when my mother left, that’s when the trouble started. He would look for her, and show me pictures of her, and ask me about my siblings. He would say, “Who are you?” and I would say, “I am your mother.” And he would say, “No, you aren’t my mother.” And he’d show me the pictures of my mother and say, “She is my mother” (Case 29).

In summary, there were permanent shifts in the persons who were central in decision-making around the children in these family networks.

f) Use of services

A number of mothers reported extreme barriers to the utilization of services. The barriers, which often were combined, included weather, transportation, income, and childcare. Legal status may also have been a problem. Of those who were able to use services, many refrained from doing so out of fear and shame. A minority spoke of finding and utilizing services, which they believed were helpful.

One mother who experienced extreme difficulties in accessing services became discouraged.

No la reciben en ningún lado. En la escuela me dieron un papel para llenar de un curso de verano para las vacaciones y el último día de clases me llega una carta diciendo que no había sido aceptada porque no había cupo. Luego en el centro comunitario de aquí al frente fui a inscribirla y me dice la señorita, “Cuántos años tiene la niña? Siete? No, no hay para ella, es para más grandes y más chiquitos que ella.” Yo le pregunté, “No tiene otra opción, otro centro comunitario?” “No.” (Caso 39).

They won’t receive her anywhere. In the school they gave me a paper to fill out for a summer course and the last day of classes I get a letter saying she has not been accepted because it was full. Then in the community centre across the street, I went to sign her up and they say, “How old is the girl?”

Seven? No, there is nothing here for her, it is for older or younger children.”
I ask, “Is there not another option, another centre?” “No.” (Case 39).

This case may be an example of what Montgomery (2002) referred to as the “Brown Paper Syndrome” against those with immigrant paperwork. Situations of “status-in-waiting” are known to create barriers in accessing services and resources and can lead to marginalization (see also Ali, Taraban, & Gill, 2003; Government of Ontario, 2005; Lessard & Ku, 2003; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Status Campaign, 2004b). A Department of Justice memo has drawn attention to the problem of denial of health coverage to immigrant children who have entitlements under provincial and federal law as well as international treaties (Martin, 2001; United Nations, 1990). Children, regardless of legal status, although legally entitled to attend school under section 49.1 of the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 1990, 2004), are frequently denied enrolment because of a specification of the federal *Immigration Act* which requires a student authorization document or evidence of the student’s identity, immunization status, and residence (Ali, Taraban, & Gill, 2003; TDSB, 2004). In the Department of Justice document, Martin (2001) says, as a matter of constitutional law, the provincial *Education Act* should govern school admission. However, this requirement is not honoured by some school boards.

Persons who are refugee claimants in a state of "status in waiting" have difficulties accessing services and supports. There is no direct money for agencies that support people who are caught in limbo. Services funded by Immigration Canada must ask for “landing papers” before working with clients, therefore many settlement services are not accessible to these families. Even landed refugees remain in “legal limbo” until they are granted permanent resident status, and they continue to experience economic and social barriers. In addition to having to show their landing papers, their Social Insurance Numbers (SIN) all begin with the number “9.” This further emphasizes their “in-between” status since SIN cards are often required when accessing various services, including employment, social assistance, and healthcare (Coates & Hayward, 2004; Brouwer, 2004).

For another mother, the barrier to access of services was financial:

Lo que pasa es que cuando llegamos aquí a Canadá, no teníamos ayuda del Gobierno para el daycare del niño y entonces era demasiado caro para nosotros pagar \$225 semanales para que nos lo cuidaran y al mismo tiempo yo estuviera estudiando inglés y luego el inconveniente del invierno, que teníamos que transportarnos, para estar con un niño era demasiado lejos. Y era imposible que yo estudiara y que otra persona nos cuidara al niño.

Entonces el invierno, las posibilidades económicas no me permitían que yo me pudiera desarrollar y estudiar el inglés (Caso 9).

What happened is that when we got to Canada, we didn't have government help for daycare, and so it was too expensive for us to pay \$225 a week for them to take care of him while I took English classes. And it was also inconvenient because of the winter weather, and we had to take the bus, and with one child it was all too far. It was impossible for me to study and have someone else care for the child. So between winter and our economic situation, this didn't allow for me to develop and study English (Case 9).

Ultimately this mother sent her child back to the home country. Although she never asked, under present regulations she would not qualify for any subsidy or assistance. This mother had no support and the disaster of her separation from her child could have been prevented by having a home visiting program such as the Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, 2005) that focuses on the needs of immigrant children. The cost of childcare is prohibitive for many families. In fact, Toronto's Neighbourhood Information Post indicates it has seen "a dramatic increase in requests for...subsidized childcare" (NIP, 2005). Service-providers in the Chinese community find that mothers are also being forced to send their children back to China due to the lack of funding available for childcare. In addition, residents of Toronto who wish to apply for subsidized childcare are required to show documentation of their immigration status: currently only Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and refugees with a valid work permit or school authorization are eligible although this policy is under review (City of Toronto, 2005).

One mother knew of childcare services but was afraid to initiate stranger-provided care. When asked why she became separated from her child, she responded:

Porque yo no quería dejar al niño con cualquier persona si yo me iba a trabajar. No calificaba para el daycare porque en ese tiempo yo no tenía mis papeles. Yo ya no estaba como estudiante, estaba en trámite, pero no tenía nada fijo. Yo decía "le dejo el bebé a una persona que me lo cuide" y como escuchaba tantos casos de que los maltratan, no sé, se me hizo muy difícil. Nos decidimos muy rápidamente. Y a los dos meses le comente a mi mamá en Colombia si aceptaba lo que yo pensaba y mi mamá, con tal de que no dejara al niño en manos ajenas me dijo que si, que ella lo cuidaba (Caso 29).

Because I didn't want to leave my son with just anyone if I went to work, I didn't qualify for daycare because at that time I didn't have my papers. I wasn't a student anymore, I was doing the paperwork, but didn't have anything yet. I would say to myself, "I'll leave the baby with someone to look after him," but since I heard about so many cases of mistreatment and abuse, it wasn't easy for me. We took the decision very quickly. So, two months later I asked my mother in Colombia if she agreed with me, and she said, as long as I wasn't leaving him in a stranger's hands. So she said, yes, she would take care of him (Case 29).

Four mothers said they were afraid to even ask if there were services for which their children qualified.⁴

A particularly stigmatized category is of that of mothers who bore children in Canada and sent them back to be cared for by relatives in their home countries. The mothers were ashamed and aware of possible emotional damage but still sent the children back. Upon reunification, some mothers felt embarrassed about having sent them back.

Jamás yo voy a decirle a alguien "mi hijo se fue por dos años y ahora volvió." Cuando en la escuela muerde o les pega a los niños, yo no puedo decirles la verdad. Y me dicen que el niño tiene que jugar con más niños para que se integre, pero no saben que realmente no estuvo conmigo. Yo no puedo decirles que el niño es rebelde por esa razón. O el niño no quiere comer y no me hace caso por esa razón. En confianza a la única persona que le puedo decir es al pediatra porque le digo "no come, ¿qué hago?" Pero porque es la salud del niño, no más (Caso 29).

I will never tell anyone that my child left for two years and now returned. When he bites or hits other children at school, I cannot tell the truth. They tell me he needs to play with more children so that he can integrate himself, but they don't know that the truth is that he was not with me. I can't tell them that he is rebellious for that reason. Or that he doesn't want to eat or pay attention to me for that reason. The only

⁴ After an information session delivered at one church, one pregnant woman approached us in tears to ask if it was true that her child would be taken away from her at birth because she was living with less than full legal status in Canada.

person I can tell is the paediatrician, so I say, “He won’t eat, what can I do?” But that is only because it is about his health (Case 29).

The mother was so ashamed of the separation which she thought to be a cause of the child’s problems. But it is reasonable to presume that the teachers and service providers had no hard facts about the mother and were unable to guess what was occurring. Information privacy issues could be a significant obstacle in delivering appropriate services.

The problem of information and service providers was dealt with in an earlier study in which one of the authors of the present report investigated refugee children in childcare centres (Bernhard & Freire, 1996). The providers did not know and did not ask about the situations. There was no information in the school files and no official request for histories of the children and families.

A common reason the mothers sent their children back to the home countries was that they were faced with the dilemma of providing for their children in situations where there were no close relatives available and where they did not see childcare as a viable option. The women’s ideas of childcare proved to be distorted and they were made fearful of their children’s wellbeing because of tabloid headlines about child molestation. For these women, care provided by strangers was not something they had encountered in their home countries, and therefore they were strongly resistant to consider it as an option.

A minority found and accessed adequate resources. Often this was through special or pilot programs, or through encounters with Spanish-speaking program staff.

Hay una señora muy buena en la escuela que pertenece a un centro comunitario, pero la pusieron en la escuela. Es hispana. Ella nos ayudó muchísimo, yo le podía hablar, nos ayudó a que el niño entrara a los cursos de ESL, porque eso no es fácil. También me llevó a un lugar donde había ropa de invierno porque no teníamos dinero y estaba muy frío (Caso 38).

There is a very good woman at the school who belongs to a community centre but is placed in the school. She is Hispanic. She helped us so much. I could talk to her. She helped my son get into the ESL classes, because that is not easy. She also took us to a place where we could get winter clothing because we had no money and it was so cold (Case 38).

These cases are in accord with those documented by Rose, Carrasco, and Charboneau (1998) who found that the support offered by resource people in local community services centres in Montreal was crucial at particular moments in the settlement process of Central American women with children. The relative scarcity of such organized programs in Spanish may be a reason why, in the present study, there were so few women in this category of satisfied users of services.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Transnational, multi-local families are now increasingly common and there are good reasons to believe they will continue to be a feature of Canadian society. In the face of multiple pressures to migrate, family separation is a viable strategy for many. Nevertheless, transnational strategies come at a tremendous human cost for couples, extended families, mothers and children. As this report has shown, separations and delayed reunifications are highly disruptive and traumatic for the families involved. Transnational, multi-local families are left to face the challenges of migration without much social support and, sometimes, with migration policies working against them.

We now summarize the data as structured by the study's main research questions:

What are the common configurations of transnational families as found in Canada?

We found different types of configurations. Most typically, the mothers are here alone or with one of their children, and one or more children are still living in the countries of origin. Typically, the children left behind were taken care of by their grandparents, who often became the main decision-makers on education, discipline and health issues. These findings are consistent with a 2005 UN report which claims that grandmothers, older daughters, or other family members most often assume responsibility for caregiving and other household activities in the mothers' absence.

How are bonds and emotional connections maintained and what are the impacts on mothers and children before and after migration and reunification?

Typically, the mothers maintained frequent contact with the children and their caregivers via telephone, letters, travel, the Internet, and the sending of gifts and money. Despite the mothers' efforts to maintain close contact, separations had an enormous impact on mothers and children.

The feelings of the mothers during separation ranged from anger and guilt to depression and hopelessness. In some cases, children suffered emotionally, became distant from their mothers, and angry or aggressive. When reunification occurred, especially after lengthy separations, estrangement often became a serious difficulty.

What are the pressures on and changes in the role of mothers?

Mothers faced many obstacles and therefore either bore extreme stress or, in a few cases, had to relinquish care-giving roles by sending the children back. Financial issues, unclear legal status or non-status, lack of access to childcare services and language limitations made the exercise of their caregiving functions extremely difficult. Moreover, ideological representations of “good mothering” tended to place the entire responsibility for childcare on the mothers’ shoulders, a situation which discouraged the women from considering external or institutional childcare or other types of social support as viable options.

What are the patterns of change of authority in transnational, multi-local families and what are their effects on children?

Decisions regarding the children were either taken by grandparents, uncles, or fathers remaining in the home countries or, in some cases, there was no proper uptake of parental authority. In the first case, the effect on the children was such that they no longer considered the mothers as authority figures. In the second case, the children attempted to parent themselves as best as they could with varying degrees of success.

In many cases, the mothers felt pressured to relinquish their rights as primary caregivers and were reluctant to express their discomfort when areas of disagreement surfaced.

What do the mothers’ experiences suggest about their awareness of services and ability (and willingness) to utilise them?

Our findings show that there was no consistent use of social services among our respondents. In some cases, accurate information was not available or the mothers were clearly misled on crucial issues. Working mothers were not recognized as being in need of social support, independently of their legal status. However, mothers who had less-than-full legal status did not have access to social support or did not approach them for fear of being reported to the police. Service providers were usually not aware of the array of problems these women faced, nor of the

shame and stigma that induced the mothers to keep themselves off the radar of social services.

This study had a number of limitations including the lack of data on the number of families in this situation. In order to ensure consistency and comparability of the findings in spite of the small sample size, several substantive restrictions were placed on the final selection of informants. First, reflecting in part a series of assumptions about the mother-child bond, only mothers were interviewed as primary caregivers. Fathers who identified as primary caregivers and who have been or remain separated from their children because they are in their countries of origin were not included in the sample. A larger sample size would certainly allow us to include both men and women caregivers. Second, while we recognize that there are many reasons why mothers and children live through periods of separation, for example, conjugal break-up or financial difficulties, in this research study, we have only selected cases where the cause of the separation is directly related to the process of migration and where either children or primary caregivers leave the countries of origin resulting in physical distance between mothers and children.

In the face of the present data and the complexity of problems they represent, we urge that service-providers and policy-makers come to understand the situation and begin to bring people negatively affected by transnational, multi-local family relationships into full citizenship.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude with a series of concrete recommendations for policy-makers, service-providers, and families. We believe the implementation of these recommendations may ease the difficulties of separation and facilitate prompt reunifications in Canada. In general, there should be a focus on the needs of transnational multi-local families, specifically through the following avenues.

a) For policy-makers at all levels:

- Develop working relationships between institutions at different levels (e.g., federal and provincial governments, school boards, municipalities, churches, immigrant-serving organizations, organizations of internationally-trained professionals, and university programs preparing educators, psychologists, family doctors, psychiatrists and social workers).
- Provide training at all levels so that policy, management, and front-line staff are aware of the different types of needs of immigrant children and families

(e.g., a graduate student family or a family that arrives knowing that at least one parent has a good job is very different from a transnational multi-local family or even an intact refugee family).

- Provide designated funding for service-providers to work with mothers who have been separated from their children.
- Include churches in service-delivery discussions.
- Make childcare and after-school program subsidies available to newly-arrived migrant children, regardless of status or entrance category.
- Prevent difficulties arising as a result of mothers sending their child back to the home countries by having a home visiting program focused on the needs of immigrant children.
- Expand medical and education coverage to all children regardless of immigrant status and provide linguistically and culturally appropriate services to ensure children can benefit.
- Extend the scope and outreach of programs such as the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program and fund them adequately.
- Develop new programs based on those that have been run successfully (e.g., RAP).
- Amend immigration policies and practices with a view to eliminating barriers to mother-child reunification and reducing processing delays that prolong family separation.
- Consider setting up qualification criteria which would enable working poor families to access social supports.
- Establish options for services where the problem is apparently now in the past, but still affects the family.
- Set up liaisons with churches and community organizations that are in fact providing social services, and re-consider their eligibility for material support

b) For educators and service providers:

- Be aware of the range of people already providing support and assistance (e.g., clergy, service-providers, guidance counselors, settlement workers).
- Organize group sessions for multi-local families to get together for information and social occasions.
- Distribute information about local services for children and parents in the home languages of the people in your community.
- Support in-service professional development for staff to prepare them to work confidently and effectively with transnational, multi-local families.
- Offer parent education that addresses specific concerns of transnational, multi-local families.
- Learn the larger family configuration and consider that you may be dealing with an unstable situation. Assume that there may be a transnational dimension. Figure out which parents or children are not in Canada. Know the timelines regarding separation and reunification.
- Find out how the transnational configuration is perceived by members of the family. Consider the issue of a mother blaming herself, and that there may be pressure on the mother to send her children back to the home country.
- Learn the lines of family authority and do not assume the authority is in Canada. Do not assume that the children and parent in Canada exchange important information.
- Consider the economics of the transnational family. Do not assume the financial situation is “workable.”
- Consider services where these might not be apparent to families. For example, counseling for women who were abused or who were victims of violence in the past because of spousal violence, or violence experienced during migration.
- Consider that service needs do not vanish upon reunification, especially where there has been extended separation. Consider whether the newly arrived children are under stress, unhappy, alienated, and/or depressed.

- Encourage children to continue to develop skills in their home language so that ongoing dialogue with their families remains a possibility.
- Recognize that seeking assistance may be stigmatized. Develop outreach programs that address this.

c) For families:

- Maintain frequent contact and open lines of communication with your children and their caregiver in the home country.
- Talk to other women in your community (and other communities) who are living in similar situations. Learn from their experiences and act collectively when possible.
- Do not give up your rights as a parent: decisions regarding health, education, discipline and care-giving are and remain yours.
- Make sure to obtain accurate information regarding your legal status and rights.
- When possible, find a lawyer or some form of trusted legal advice (licensed immigration consultants).
- In most cases, processes of reunification take between 1 and 3 years, sometimes even up to 5 years. Having short-term and mid-term plans for yourself and your family during the time of separation will help you cope with the long wait.
- Reunification is a happy but extremely challenging process. It is normal for children to miss their caregivers and the home they left behind.
- When you reunite with your children, be attentive to signs of emotional distress (health problems, low academic performance, sadness, anger, bedwetting) and look for help at the school, church or community centres.
- Find out about and use the social services that are offered in your community. There are organizations that provide support for parents.

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- Be good to yourself and to women in similar situations. Take extra care of yourself during the period of separation and reunification.
- Seeking help from professionals (e.g., counselors, therapists) can be beneficial. It is not a sign of personal failure. Many people receive help for a period of time and then move on with their lives.

8. REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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