Maternal migration:
a study on the children who have stayed

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Summary

Whilst female migration has increased worldwide, in the northeast of Brazil 70% of migrants are women. The aim of the current study is to research this group in order to understand the impact of maternal migration in the lives of their children. The specific focus of this qualitative research was to examine the strategies employed by these mothers to deal with the rupture created by the new circumstances resulting form their migration. The study specifically examined the experience of seven adolescent children of women who had migrated. They also researched others involved in the care of these children. The research involved semi-structured interviews with two specific scripts: one for teenagers and one for their carers. The interviews were then subjected to content analysis. The results suggest that all of the adolescent children continue to be affected by the migration of their mothers which led to a variety of developmental impacts. Expectations for the future within these families were shown to centre on the formation of a traditional family.

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Keywords: migration, mothers, families, adolescents, parenting.

Résumé. *Migration maternel: une étude à propos des enfants qui sont restés*

La migration des femmes a augmenté dans le monde entier. Au Brésil, ce constat est réalité en particulier dans le Nord, où 70% des migrants sont des femmes. L'objectif de cette étude est de comprendre l'impact de la migration maternelle dans la vie des enfants. Les objectifs spécifiques sont les stratégies adoptées pour faire face à la rupture, aux nouvelles conditions de vie et à l'avenir. L'étude a rassemblé sept adolescents, des enfants des femmes qui ont émigré à l'étranger et six responsables. Ceci est une recherche qualitative. Les instruments utilisés sont: entretiens semi-structurés avec deux scripts spécifiques: l'un pour les adolescents et un pour les responsables de l'étude. Les entrevues ont été analysées en fonction de l'analyse de contenu. Les résultats indiquent que tous les adolescents continuent à ressentir l'impact de la migration de sa mère. Le développement de tous a changé en quelque sorte. Les attentes pour l'avenir s'articulent autour de la formation d'une famille traditionnelle.

Mots-clés: migration, mères, familles, adolescents, création.

Resumen. *Migración materna: un estudio de los niños que permanecieron*

La migración de las mujeres ha aumentado en todo el mundo. En Brasil, este hecho se realiza especialmente en el noreste, donde 70% de los migrantes son mujeres. El objetivo de este estudio fue comprender el impacto de la migración materna en la vida de los niños. Los objetivos específicos fueron las estrategias adoptadas para hacer frente a la ruptura, las nuevas condiciones de vida y el futuro. Participaron del estudio siete adolescentes, hijos de mujeres que emigraron del país y seis responsables de los mismos. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron entrevistas semi-estructuradas con dos guiones específicos: uno para los adolescentes y uno para los responsables. Las entrevistas fueron evaluadas de acuerdo con el análisis de contenido. Los resultados indican que todos los adolescentes siguen sintiendo el impacto de la migración de su madre. Todo su desarrollo ha cambiado de alguna manera. Las expectativas para el futuro giran en torno de la formación de una familia tradicional.

Palabras clave: migración, madres, familias, adolescentes, creación.

Introduction

Despite new configurations, the family continues to play a key role in people's lives, providing through their interactions an indispensable support for the physical, social, emotional, affective and psychological development of all members of the family system.

In contemporary society the institution of the family is undergoing changes in its structure and functioning. The traditional structure of the family, consisting of father, mother and child, had the primary responsibility for the socialization of the child. This traditional structure has been challenged by pressures to perform social and other functions satisfactorily, resulting in a failure for such families to provide a safe haven in difficult times for its members.

As a result of changes in family configurations, due to social changes, show us how the family has become fragmented and pluralistic. According to Carvalho (2007), a society can be considered "controversial" if, on the one hand, it creates so many technological advances to keep the population connected, but on the other hand, this leaves challenges family bonds leaving the family vulnerable. Historically, among the changes caused in the family structure, the so-called "feminist emancipation" stands out, especially due to the penetration of women into the labor market. With more effective and independent participation, women sought, through labor activity, the recognition of more equal rights regarding men. The woman of today has as a consequence to take care of so much: the domestic tasks, the care and education of the children, their professional qualification and even beauty care. Women in contemporary society thus have to take care of not only traditional functions but new roles, including sharing with men the role of provider and maintainer of the home. In many instances women assume the role of being the head of the family.

According to Scarpellini and Carlos (2011), women have conquered their space in society and became co-providers of the family. The success of women in the labour market, however can also become a risk factor for marital crises. Since the woman have had to divide their time between home and work there has been a significant increase in divorce. Divorce then results in family structures including an increase in single-parent families. Single mothers and fathers began to reconstitute their lives and thus the new family configurations emerged: single-parent families, made up of one of the parents and the children; blended families, formed by separated couples, often, with children of previous relations; more recently, transnational families, among others.

According to Del Priore (1994), single-parent families, composed of mothers and children, occur in a greater proportion than those composed by fathers and children. Female-headed households have grown in recent decades. According to the Demographic Census (IBGE, 2011), between 2000 and 2010, the number of female-headed households rose from 22.2% to 37.3%. The number of single women with children has also increased. At present, families consisting of single-mother children correspond to 14.2%, while families consisting only of the father and the children correspond to only 1.8%, since in most cases the men marry again or delegate the task of raising children to other relatives.

These data confirm that, on average, one in three Brazilian families are headed by women. Worldwide the majority of the women in charge of the household are single-parent. According to Scarpellini and Carlos (2011) in the case of divorce, the separation happens in most cases with the agreement of the couple. But in case of abandonment of the home, the separation occurs without the consent of one of the parties. Thus, single-

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parent families arise from circumstances, often unrelated to the will of one of the spouses, imposing its formation on its elements.

It is a fact that separation is more frequent in the poorer sections of society than in others. According to Scapellini and Carlos (2011), single-parent families consisting of single mothers, whether separated or single, are generally more "vulnerable" in the economic aspect, since they are often the only ones responsible to provide and care for the children.

Vitale (2002) states that the woman who head of a single parent family faces strenuous hours of extra and intrafamily work. The challenge of reconciling work and family life is present in testimonials revealing the difficulty of the woman/mother who is the provider of family support.

According to Castellanos (2005), one of the factors associated with female migration is precisely the increase of female-headed households, especially among the poorest sections of the population. Barahona (2002) suggests that this occurs because of the higher incidence of poverty in the families headed by women, which becomes one of the main determinants for the migration. Nowadays increasingly valued as an alternative for women, migration is seen as a solution for those living high levels of poverty and basic needs that are not met. In this context, the majority of migrant women are single, abandoned or separated mothers who act as heads of households and as such provide child support. In the face of difficulties, they leave in search of a better life for themselves and for their children (Rodriguez, 2001).

Single-parent families comprising mothers and children, who experience maternal migration, are now known as "transnational families". They are those families whose relatives are divided between two or more countries. Zontini (2007) notes that as a result of the transnationalism of these families there is not a shared residence, since its members are geographically separated but maintaining social, cultural and affective bonds. She adds that transnational families are a common aspect of migration. They include global professional elites to poor migrant workers, a phenomenon that has increased migration around the world.

In view of the above, the general objective of this research was to understand the impact of maternal migration abroad on the lives of their children. The specific objectives were to analyze the strategies adopted by the family to deal with the rupture caused by migration.

Migrant women and their children

According to Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila (1997), "transnational maternity" is, especially stressful for mothers who have to leave their children in the country of origin. Given the fundamental link between mothers and their children, maternal migration increases the burden on mothers who migrate in order to provide a better life for their children. In addition, they have to deal with their own suffering and the children who stay in the country of origin (Parreñas, 2005). The problem of maternal migration is

particularly evident in Latin America because, as in some of its countries, female migration has become more prevalent (Immigration and Refugee Board, 2005).

In Brazil, these data are confirmed. The Census (IBGE, 2011) pointed out that women are the majority among those who emigrated (53.8%). In the states of the Northeast, the percentage of emigration of women is even higher, reaching 64.3% in Pernambuco, 70.1% in Ceará and 70.3% in Rio Grande do Norte. According to Hazeu (2013), the profile of these women is similar. «They are young people who are going through a defining moment: divorce, maternity, unemployment or rethinking and reevaluating their lives» (p.10) and according to unofficial statistics, each of them leaves, on average, a child in Brazil. It is therefore easy to conclude how many Brazilian children live without the presence of their mothers and waiting for their migratory success.

In most cases, female migration occurs due to economic problems. The idea is to migrate and send most of the income earned to the children who remain in the country of origin and spend as little as possible. Migrant mothers often choose not to be accompanied by their children, since they first have to work and solve their generally irregular situation in the destination country. Thus, children are entrusted to other family members. According to Castañeda and Busk (2011), the consequences of this situation, which differ according to personal circumstances, depend, above all, on the duration of the mothers' migration.

In reality, in our culture, the mother has primary responsibility in many areas related to children and, in general, in Latin American cultures, this should not be transferred to others. In other words, when a mother's care is transferred to other people, the mother becomes subject to social disapproval, which can lead to a number of problematic situations and often produces much suffering for some mothers and children.

Parreñas (2005), in her research on migrant mothers, states that children of migrant mothers express greater problems regarding their transnational family life than the children of migrant fathers. It would seem that the emotional pain experienced in these transnational families is promoted by the separation, but is undoubtedly intensified by the self-imposed expectations in the mothers to carry out culturally and ideologically, the multiple duties required of them. The referred author also explains that the pain of separation in children generates feelings of rejection, loneliness, vulnerability, insecurity and abandonment because they have been separated from their mothers, even after reunification. Cortes (2010) compared children of migrant parents with children of migrant mothers in the Philippines and concluded that maternal migration had a global negative effect on children's education, arguing that maternal absence was more harmful than paternal. Likewise, Jampaklay (2006) concluded that maternal absence in the long term negatively affected the education of children in Thailand, which is not at the same level in relation to paternal absence.

According to Parrenãs (2005), by listening to parts of the interviews with children of migrant mothers, the person could say that they received no care. In many ways they said they did not receive proper care for the family members they stayed with. Children whose mothers sent amounts of money and, moreover, phoned at least once a week, said they were "abandoned". Children or adolescents whose aunt helped with homework, reported inadequate care. Generally, children have a vision of the maternal function that makes

them believe that it is impossible to exercise this function at a distance. It is interesting to note that these children stated that even if they had someone else whom they could call mother, like a grandmother, for example, she would not be able to replace her mother's place. In general, the children questioned the quality of care they received from other relatives, stating that they only gave them what was required as food and clothing. As an example, we have Roan, a 17-year-old boy whose mother has been a migrant for eleven years and was interviewed by Parreñas. He said: "The right thing would be having my mother by my side!".

The migration, according to the Bioecological Theory of Human Development from Bronfenbrenner (1979/1996) is considered a non-normative transition and does not have rituals of passage as in the case of other transitions, for example, the wake, which helps the family to live in mourning and return to everyday life. Falicov (2001) argues that, by migrating, the family loses its roots in physical, social and cultural levels, and although there are no transitional rituals, families usually create ways to deal with ambiguous losses through what the author characterized as "spontaneous rituals" that act as protective factors and promoters of family resilience. She cites visits, sending messages, money remittances and gifts regularly, provide a way of continuing and connecting with the family in the country of origin, especially with elderly parents and children.

Corroborating this Falicov, Machado (2006) affirms that the relationship between parents and children happens to be mediated by the remittances or the benefits that it might provide. The author discovered that money enters as a flow of substance "at a distance", producing the material well-being of the children (food, clothing, school, toys, etc.) and ties relationships in the absence of the physical presence of the parents.

Migrant mothers do not abandon their children on migration. In order to compensate their physical absence, they try in many cases to be present in their lives, for example, by sending money. This link between mothers and their children is established by remittances, seen by Machado (2006), as a kind of "symbolic blood" which, as we shall see, brings with it a certain ambiguity.

Migrant mothers generally consider that the funds they send to their families are a means of staying in touch, but in reality, from the point of view of children, separation is felt as abandonment regardless of the motives or circumstances in cause. According to UNICEF (2011), although many studies address the economic aspects of migration, it is important to focus on the psychological costs that separating families can cause on children and adolescents. Despite the fact that many migrant mothers send money to their families and remain in contact through social networks, Grinberg and Grinberg (1984) argue that families often pay for the transfer of funds with the psychological trauma generated by migration and separation from the family.

A UNICEF report (2011) indicates that children separated from their parents due to migration are twice as likely to suffer from psychological problems as other children, even though their economic situation is more advantageous. The main psychological problems consist of feelings of abandonment, sadness, demotivation and even despair, revolt and lack of self-confidence, which can sometimes lead to violent behavior.

According to Falicov (2001), separations within nuclear families are frequent in migration. She points out that the departures and reunions put all family subsystems in a situation of ambiguous loss and makes it unclear who is in and who is out of it. These separations and reunions can generate structural, emotional, and psychosomatic problems in all its members. Parallel to migration, the emergence of other life cycle transitions, whether normative or non-normative, are inevitable. When such transitions occur in the country of origin, the migrant cannot attend and participate in rituals such as the sudden death of a relative. This increases the sense of guilt and leads to a process of questioning the migration and even of the return, or not, to the country of origin. Events such as children's birthdays, school celebrations such as Mother's Day bring suffering not only to the migrant but also to the children left behind. Considering that transitions are periods of crisis and family reorganization, when two or more occur at the same time it is possible that these factors become especially stressful.

When couples are separated, the children often stay in the middle of the decision. In some cases, couples divide and lie at opposite poles in relation to migration. One wants the child to stay and does not authorize their migration, while the other wants to take the child to live with him or her. One idealizes the new country and all its possibilities, while the other denigrates it. One is optimistic about migration while the other becomes pessimistic. In this context, the child or adolescent is divided as to which way to go, due to not having the autonomy to decide, ends up migrating or staying, depending on the agreement made between the father and the mother.

When the father migrates, he usually leaves his children to the care of his mother, but when the two migrate, or when the mother, because of separation from her husband, widowed or for any other reason, the care of the children tend to remain to their grandparents, close relatives or even the former companion (Reis, 1999). In these cases, the family undergoes a restructuring, changing its dynamics to accommodate the new situation. However, according to Hulsendeger (2006), these new family contexts often generate a sense of insecurity and even abandonment, since the idea of a caregiver parent gives way to different "managing" fathers and mothers, of children that are not always theirs. In our culture, while taking into account that family types have changed a lot today, when couples separate, the children often stay with the mother, and it is difficult for them, in most cases, to live without their presence.

When these children or adolescents stay in the country of origin, they begin to live in new family constellations. New family arrangements arise, for example: the children can stay with the father, the grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, people hired or even alone. In such cases, arrangements are not always accepted by society, as in the case of children remaining alone without being under the care of an adult. As expressed by Machado «when families are structured in a way other than that considered morally appropriate, migration appears as a dangerous option» (2006, p. 14).

Far from parents, or in this case the mother, the role of caregivers become fundamental to their development. However, these caregivers do not always have the time and resources to devote to them. On the other hand, according to Almeida and Siqueira (2008), the children or adolescents themselves, because they do not recognize the authority of their

caregivers, end up in conflict with their caregivers. The feelings generated by the sensation of abandonment, or liberty, associated with the biopsychological transformations that occurred during the period of child and adolescent development, together with the changes in the family structure, contribute to these children being in a phase of imbalance and uncertainties. The new caregivers, in many cases the grandparents, who need to take full responsibility on grandchildren, most often feel unprepared to deal with the situation.

Hulsendeger (2006) also argues that regardless of the family arrangement or the way it is being structured, the family must be the space essential to ensure the survival and full protection of the children. Nevertheless, we realize that the temporary or permanent absence of the mother due to migration leads children to claim more than a space of survival and protection. They are happy with the pleasures and gifts given by the mothers, as well as with the standard of life offered by them, however, they miss the maternal presence, the approach and the coexistence in the daily life of the family.

In the final report of the research carried out by the Information and Technical Assistance Center (CIAAT, 2007), the statements of family members and friends of migrants corroborate to this assertion: children are being placed at risk as they are raised by relatives without the presence of parents. It is clear that, in addition to this sudden rupture, children often have to change their homes, neighborhoods, which contributes to reinforce feelings of insecurity and non-belonging. Paula and Vilarino (2007) affirm that these «new responsible present difficulties in exercising some type of control over the children or adolescents, therefore they are quite tolerant and even indulgent in regard to desires or attitudes of rebellion» (p. 190). The absence of rules that limit and guide the lives of these children is striking, as these "caregivers" are often unable to establish the same authority as their parents, thus legitimizing the feelings of liberty or insecurity felt by the children of absent parents.

Family ties represent an affective and material security without which it is difficult to live. Obviously, the rupture of these bonds brings about changes and, with migration, the family experiences conflicts due to these structural, affective and social changes reflected in the life of the developing child and adolescent. However, although these mothers are not physically present, they are still present in their children's lives due to the phenomenon called "presence in the absence", which points to the existence of a relationship with their children, even if at a distance, through remittances, gifts, telephone contacts and via the internet. This regular communication is now possible, and is part of everyday life in transnational families.

Method

The research used a qualitative methodology. As for the criterion of the choice of participants, we use purposive sampling (Turato, 2003). The participants of this research were seven adolescents, between 13 to 18 years old, being four girls and three boys, whose mothers migrated abroad since more than three years; and their responsible (four

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grandmothers, one aunt and one father). The instrument used was the semistructured interview, with a specific script for adolescents and another one for those responsible, developed based on the objectives and the literature review. The sociodemographic data of the participants were filled out.

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee (approval number 11586912.4.0000.5206). Before starting the interview, each participant was explained the purpose of the research and presented the Free and Informed Consent Term that guarantees anonymity. Minors were asked for the consent of the person in charge. The interviews were analyzed according to the Thematic Content Analysis (Minayo, 2004).

Results and Discussion

The analysis and discussion of the results were based on data from the interviews with the responsible family member and with the adolescent; three thematic axes were derived:

1) impact felt by children and adolescents on the occasion of the mother's migration;
2) observed changes in the development of adolescents in the emotional, social and school areas;
3) coexistence strategies and expectations for the future.

Each family was assigned a letter of the alphabet and a number to identify them, being son or daughter, for the teenagers and Mr./Mrs. for those responsible.

Impact felt by children and adolescents on the occasion of the mother's migration

All participants felt that as a consequence of migration that their family structure had undergone profound changes. For example, in one family, two teenagers stayed with their father, four moved in with their grandmother and one lived alone, supervised by a maternal aunt. The following statements demonstrate the impact felt by them, from the perspective of two grandmothers, who were responsible for the grandchildren.

When my daughter left, she felt very sorry, and I was still alone with the responsibility of my granddaughter (daughter A1). She (referring to her daughter) said to me, "Please, Mother, do not let my daughter forget me" (Mrs. A).

Especially he (son C1), had that impact, suffered a lot, cried, did not want to hear anyone, was rebellious, ate nothing. Even a chocolate cake I made he started to cry and could not eat, longing for his mother. He did not want to go to school. In fact, he was loving, obedient, studious. Then he became rebellious, sad, difficult (Mrs. C).

According to Bernhard *et al.* (2005), Levitt (2001) and Marinho (2001), the separation brings serious emotional problems characterized by sadness and alienation on the part of the children, as we can perceive in the statements presented.

Changes in the development of the child or adolescent in the emotional, social and school areas

All participants presented difficulties in school, represented by disapproval and difficulty of concentration, lack of interest and even school dropout (two cases). In the emotional aspect one can observe feelings of sadness, abandonment, low self-esteem and even revolt. The excerpts exemplify the changes that have been experienced:

When my mother left, I could not concentrate on my studies and almost repeated the 4th grade. In the other years, I've always been below the average grade so I had to recover, but I did not go to the Class Council. I'm better this year (Son D1).

He was very aggressive with me, he does not listen to me at all, he defies me. He fights at school, I was called many times and explained that his mother traveled. He almost repeated the schoolyear, and does not want to study. He says that studying here does not help, and that he is leaving (Msr. D).

According to Jones, Sharpe and Sogren (2004) boys are more likely to have problems with interpersonal relationships. School performance is greatly affected, possibly as a result of the emotional turmoil accompanying the separation or for some who adopt a "hoping to migrate" mentality (Pottinger, 2005), as in the case of the D1 child.

Coexistence strategies and expectations for the future

As strategies of coexistence some began to perceive the grandmother as mother. The following speech is an example of what has been said:

I've already told her (referring to the grandmother) that when I marry, she is the who enters with me in the ceremony. The mother I have is my grandmother (Son E1).

As for the future, the majority demonstrated the desire to form a family in the traditional model composed by father, mother and children, and could point to a possible desire to want to have what they did not have. In addition, were observed plans to work and be independent, as seen in the following speech:

I have to get a job, have a structured family. I want to do differently with my children. I do not want to live much longer with my grandmother, but I'll take care of her because she took care of me. She is old now. She has labyrinthitis, arthritis, such things (Son E1).

It is also noticed that the participants would like to be close to their mothers, and wish their return to the country of origin.

She (the mother) fought a lot when my girlfriend got pregnant, but now that my daughter was born, she's better. She even sent a suitcase of presents to my little girl and I gave her name to my daughter, my mother's name. I hope that one day she comes back and so we can get along better (Son F1).

Conclusions

As a result of the migration of the maternal figure, children experienced feelings of rejection, low self-esteem, sadness, revolt and failure that persisted, even when there was the attempt of family reunification. It is important to emphasize that the new technologies contribute to the mothers to continue communicating with their children virtually, which for some softens the longings and contributes to the maintenance of the relationship between them. They are also present through the sending of pampering and money to the children, although this does not seem to attenuate the longing and the need of their presence with them.

In the relationship between a family and school, it can be seen that all the children presented difficulties in schooling, which can be seen in cases of repetition and even dropping out of school.

Caregivers, on the other hand, often feel overwhelmed by the demands of the creation of these adolescents who, in addition to being in a moment of transition in their development, they also have to deal with the repercussions of the maternal migration. Some children are trapped between the desire to go where the mother is or to stay in Brazil. Others are already determined and prefer to live in the country of origin, giving continuity to their own projects of life.

As we know that migration is a phenomenon in increasing expansion, we consider that there is a need for visibility of this phenomenon, as well as the formulation of new policies and family therapy interventions that could support both the families that stay and the migrating mothers leaving their children behind.

Given the complexity of this topic, it would be pretentious to believe we have learned everything there is to learn. We consider, however, that we were able to make an initial survey of the issue, but certainly new investigations are necessary. However, we believe we have contributed especially to sensitize professionals and families to the problems related to migration, hoping, furthermore, to bring awareness, to those women who migrate to work, about the reality of migration and its consequences.

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