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Transnational, Multi-Local Motherhood: Experiences of Separation and Reunification among Latin American Families in Canada

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WORKING PAPER SERIES

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

Judith Bernhard,
Patricia Landolt, and
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Transnational, Multi-Local Motherhood: Experiences of Separation and Reunification Among Latin American Families in Canada[1]

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the experiences of Latin American families who have faced separation and reunification during their migration process to Canada. It examines 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[1] This report was prepared by the Latin American Research Group (LARG). The LARG website can be found at: http://www.yorku.ca/cohesion/LARG/html/largindex2.htm. 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. This report benefitted from the support of Paola Bohórquez (York University).

the world. The Latin American Research Group (LARG) examined Latin American migrant families, civil society institutions and institutional development, solidarity groups, and Canadian government policies, as well as emigrant-oriented policies of selected sending countries.

We gratefully acknowledge the participation of the families, and the support of the service providers and clergy who helped us locate the participants. We are particularly indebted to Maria Angelica Enriquez of the Centre for Spanish Speaking People in Toronto for organizing an event for prospective participants. We thank the project coordinators, Joana Londono and Delmy Xiomara Peraza, for their excellent contributions. We are grateful to Julie Young for her contribution to the final stages of the report. We also thank those people who reviewed this paper and offered invaluable comments which we have tried our best to reflect in the final version: Maurice Francois, San Esteban Parish; Janet Dench, Canadian Council for Refugees; Rebecca Bassey, Toronto Public Health; Peter Dorfman, Settlement Workers in Schools; Maria Antelo, Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO); Colette Snyder, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ontario Region; Ted Richmond, The Laidlaw Foundation; Carolina Gajardo, COSTI; Julie Mathien, City of Toronto; Ellen Camus, The Corner Project; Robert Young, Sullivan, Festeryga, Lawlor and Arrell, LLP; and Steven M. Polak, LLB, Lerners LLP.

KEY WORDS: Transnational, family, migration, Latin-American, access, social cohesion

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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, and it is such families who were the subjects for this research project.

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 was given to the toll exacted on families when there had been long periods of separation between children and parents. The CCR report stated 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 made clear, this failure is occurring despite the fact that, in Canada, human rights are legally and constitutionally guaranteed.

A second CCR report, "Impacts on Children of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act" (CCR 2004b), stated that, despite Canada's commitment to protect children, as evidenced by its being a signatory to 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" (CCR 2004b, 10). The Convention, in fact, 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 have been 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 can be found in Regulation 117 (9) (d) of the IRPA, which 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 of transnational, multi-local families from Latin America within a Canadian context. 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, for the most part, were 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 examined separations 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 research examined a particular set of cases of Latin American women, either living on their own or with a spouse, who had 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 were delays in the processing of the spouse's arrival; situations in which spouses had come to Canada and then returned home because of not having their credentials recognized; and situations in which one parent had returned home but the rest of the family had stayed here 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 is allowed to pass, some of the remaining children may no longer want to migrate. In many cases, however, 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 participants indicated that families did not become transnational, multi-local families because they considered that to be 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 were discovered to be leading to, and in some cases perpetuating, the geographic dispersal of family members. According to some studies, such dispersals come at a high emotional cost, particularly for children (Levitt 2001). Furthermore, family dispersal also has been found to generate feelings of continuous instability. Indeed, Brouwer has argued "the newcomer community does not consider anyone settled until their family is [in Canada]" (Brouwer 2004, 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 well-being and health of children in such situations. This report is concerned with reforms to both educational and social welfare policies that might assist such families in the settlement process.

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 emphasis on family immigration and long-term settlement, towards fostering the entry of high-end professionals. Nevertheless, at the low-end, there have been efforts to facilitate the entry of temporary migrant workers (Reitz 2005). While Canada has maintained its reputation as an immigrant-friendly country, there has developed a growing sense that newcomers do not accurately perceive the difficulties associated with 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 are problematic governmental regulations and procedures. As well, there are decided gaps in services available to immigrants and refugees in terms of both their range and ease of access. Furthermore, there has been inadequate monitoring both of the settlement process and of its frequent difficulties. In fact, there appear to be no routine or matter-of-course assessments of social or educational welfare. The schools, in particular, seem to have treated the children of transnational, multi-local families as they would any other migrant children. No problems seem to have been either assumed or investigated with respect to this group, and responses to obvious symptoms and perceived negative behaviour often have been clumsy and unhelpful (see Bernhard, Freire, Bascunan, Arenas, Rugeles Verga, and Gana 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 insurance.[2] 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.

Along with some other transnational families, refugees may fail to fully avail themselves of services and facilities, even when they were available. Refugees, in particular, often remain 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 and legal aid and school officials. Being almost 'underground,' the children in such situations often fail to access the most basic services such as healthcare, childcare, and after-school and summer programs.

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[2] 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, Minster 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).

Besides the usual fears with which newcomers arrive, other sources of fear have been found to surface once they are in Canada. The English and ethnic press often have focussed on the dangers of childcare centres and the issue of vulnerability to crime. As a consequence, child molesters are greatly feared in a way that is out of proportion to the actual number of incidents. It would appear, then, that a number of factors, in combination, can be said to contribute to the fears of newcomers and have tended to keep them huddled together with members of their immediate family in a self-protective and overly isolated cocoon.

The Canadian Context

Although the proportion of refugees accepted in recent years has remained fairly constant at between 10 and 11 per cent of all newcomers to Canada, the situation of high demand around the world and the backlog in processing applications here has meant that: a) it takes longer for refugee applicants to become landed and sponsor family members; and b) many people have been rejected, often ending up in a situation of having to live in Canada with less-than-full legal status (Status Campaign 2004a and 2004b). Similarly, there have been 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 those applicants whose home countries lie in Africa and the Middle East, the data indicate that 20 per cent of applications still have not been finalized after two years. It is important to note that these time frames do not reflect the total time of family separation, only the processing time for the applications. Visa students, landed immigrants, and refugees from within also have been affected by such processing delays (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2005; Coates and Hayward 2004; CPJ 2005; Brouwer 2004).

Given this context, an understanding of transnational, multi-local families in Canada through a family-focussed 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 seems to have led policymakers to assume that things were on track and the required services already were in place.

Much of the literature on transnationalism has been "situated" within either 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 newcomers in this country (Reitz 1998). With the exception of special temporary worker programs and investor programs, since the 1960s and 1970s, Canadian policy has supported the migration of complete families, and where such movement has not been possible, has facilitated family reunification.

Except for some research conducted under the auspices of the Metropolis project, most investigations have focussed on the immigration process itself, and little attention has been paid to longer-term settlement issues. Within this general lack of settlement studies, there has been a particular dearth of work on dispersed migrant families. In fact, in the United States, the label

"transnational" family only began to appear in research about 10 years ago (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

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

Expectations of Motherhood

The problem of transnational, multi-local families 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 origin for refugee claimants (Immigration and Refugee Board 2005). Moreover, the adaptation process for Latin American transnational families has had its own peculiar characteristics. One of the key issues has been related to social norms regarding the status and duties of mothers in families. In effect, the mother has the primary responsibility in many areas related to children, and, within Latin American cultures, 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 a mother to others have occurred, the mother has been found to have become subject to social disapproval and stigmatization. Even in cases where the relatives in the home country initially were supportive of her migration, the mother still has been discovered to suffer because she, herself, frequently comes to believe that 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 high expectations associated with the conventional views about motherly devotion have given rise to a number of problematic situations and frequently have produced a great deal of distress for some mothers. As pointed out by Salazar Parreñas in her 2001 study of Philippine mothers, there can be said to be 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, 387).

In their study of 385 early adolescents from several countries who had immigrated to the United States, Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, within the framework of attachment theory, gave extensive consideration to the effects of separation on the children. 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" (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002, 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 separations. Furthermore, Glasgow and 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 Transnational, Multi-Local Families

There have been some rather successful attempts, albeit usually on a small scale, to deal with the problems associated with belonging to a transnational, multi-local family, and they are worth noting. Unfortunately, several of the projects had very limited life spans.

- Citizenship and Immigration, Ontario, funds the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) and Settlement Education Partnership of Toronto (SEPT) programs in partnership with local school boards. main goal is to facilitate the integration of newcomer students and their families in their school and community. 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 and the provision of 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, 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 and/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 a recognition of the pressing needs of immigrants, including those belonging to transnational, multi-local families, many organizations work with very limited resources. In addition, the lack of coordination between organizations and agencies sometimes produces unnecessary duplication of services in some areas while providing no support or insufficient support in others.[3] Finally, 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.

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[3] 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).

Purposes of This Report

This report has been organized to facilitate the examination of a number of social and psychological issues that arise when a family becomes separated and is, therefore, recast 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 seldom have either contemplated or planned for 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 already have been examples of successful interventions, models do exist for dealing with these problems, and this report wishes to draw attention to them. New programming, thus, will not have to start from zero and without any previous experiences upon which to draw. This report also is 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, and Goldring, 2004). The report also includes a series of recommendations for those policy makers who are responsible for Canadian immigration and refugee law; for educators and service providers who deal with members of transnational, multi-local families; and it attempts to provide some concrete suggestions for the families to help them cope with long separations.

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 their ability (and willingness) to utilise them?

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

The study is based on 40 one-on-one interviews with mothers from Latin America that were conducted by first-language Spanish speakers. In each case, 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; they do not, therefore, constitute a random sample. The 40 female-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, in most of the cases, had been a very difficult and painful experience that would continue to have repercussions for years to come. As a result, we 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 was a significant number of women who had become separated from their children, yet many were either fearful, ashamed of speaking, or did not want to discuss such private and painful matters. Because of this, we decided 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. Even today, only a relatively few Toronto churches conduct their services in Spanish, and these institutions tend to be spatially concentrated in the central city.

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 were 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 mothers said their children were under one year of age, 10 had children between 1 and 2, 11 had children 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. Most of the rest of the respondents came to Canada because of situations of underlying political violence and general situations of crime and public insecurity in the sending country (N = 23). A very 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 had been 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 had come as tourists and students. It is important to note that our Latin American subjects had used this variety of methods of entry. This stands in marked contrast to, for instance, Filipino and West Indian transnational mothers, who have a long tradition of migration to Canada under the domestic caregiver program. Indeed, we did not find anyone in our sample who had come with an offer of employment. Moreover, 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, regardless of their educational background and professional experience, most of them were performing cleaning jobs or were unwilling welfare recipients.

FINDINGS [4]

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 and Canada and/or 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 the divorce, two of her three children went to visit 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 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 either to leave their home country and/or to 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,

[4] The names of participants are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

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 mama 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 a 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

Many of the women who were interviewed were part of extended family networks that were spread across countries and that involved the regular circulation of goods, resources, individuals, and information across international boundaries. 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. Nine 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. Some participants had 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	Per cent
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 and communication technologies, and lowering prices for these services, had spurred a burst of activity in these families. Many had cell phones, phone cards, Internet access, Web-cams and such individuals 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.

According to our study participants, while separated, most of the children were cared for by their grandparents (N=22); their fathers (N=10); or by others (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).

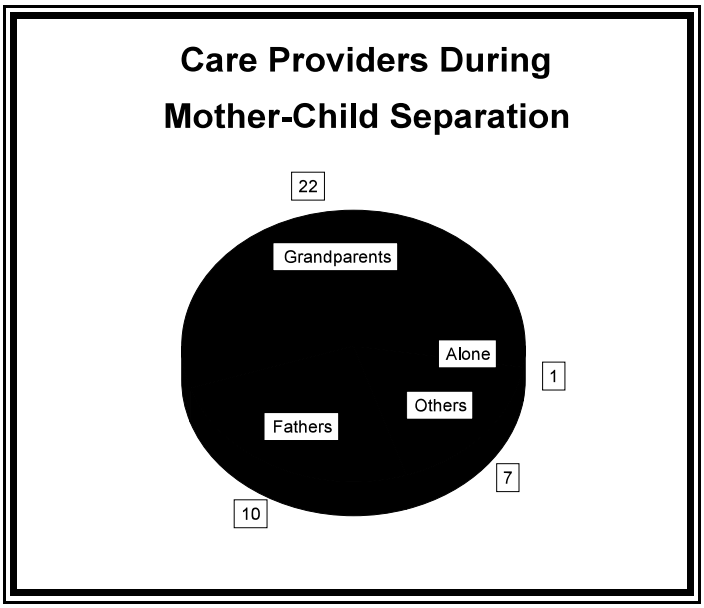

Figure 1

c) Length of Separation

At the time of the interviews, half the families already had been reunited with their children and half remained separated (see Table 2). In most cases, the length of separation was between 7 months and 5 years. In 4 of the cases, the separations lasted longer: between 6 and 8 years; while only one mother experienced a separation of less than 7 months. 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
26-36 months	0	0	0
37-60 months	5	8	13
61-96 months	0	4	4
Total	20	20	40

The processing times for visa applications varied significantly depending on the embassy location from which the applications were 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 in the absence of their parents. 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 to life.

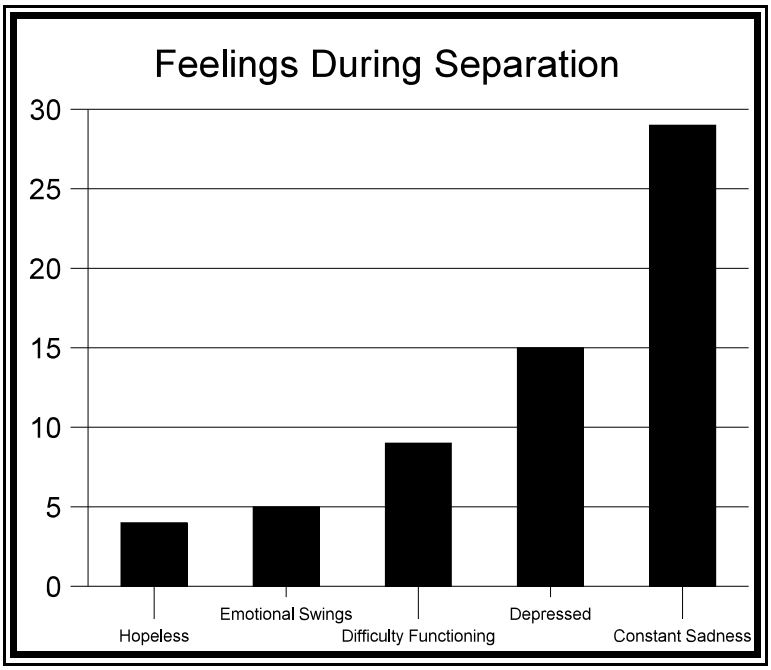

Figure 2

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 led 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 later and found one or two half-siblings, which made them feel 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 hacia. 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, prolonged splits and separations took their toll on parents and children. On the other hand, where reunifications occurred, this was often the beginning of new difficulties, rather than a 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) has argued 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 blood mothers 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 assumed responsibility for such 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.

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).

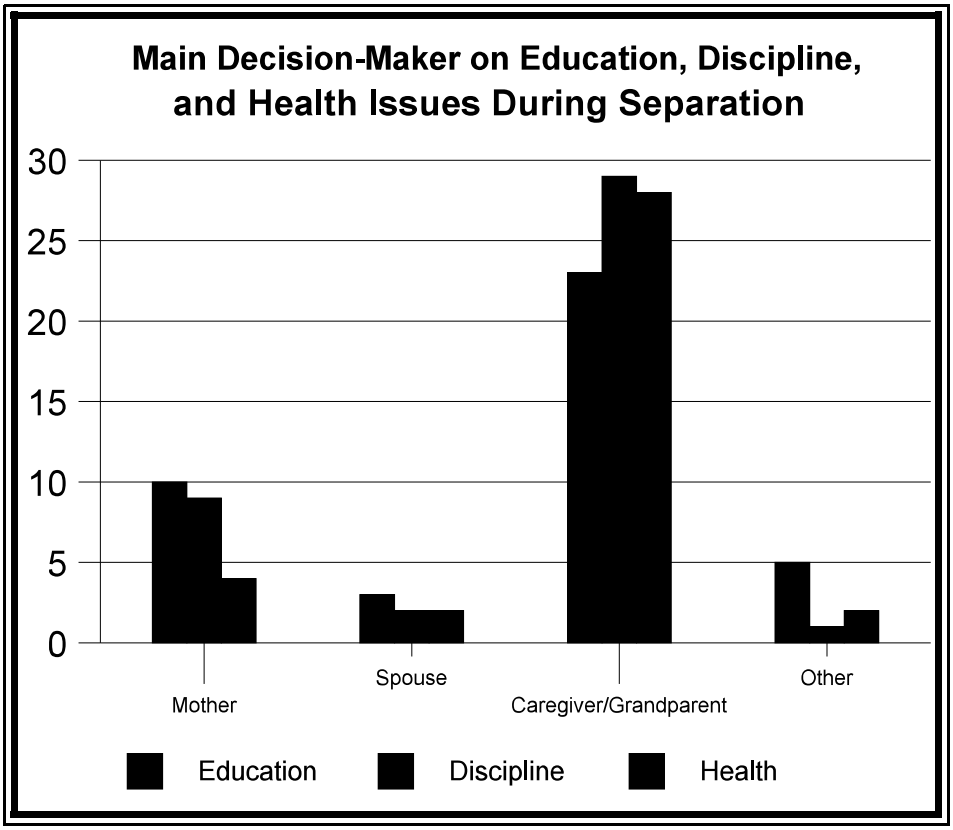

Figure 3

The relatives, who found themselves 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 proximity and actions of the relatives brought about a lessening, and in extreme cases, an ending, of the mothers' direct emotional connections with their children.

Preservation of emotional ties can be handled well, but often, due to infrequency of contact and lack of daily input, feelings of estrangement became a difficulty when 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 feelings of estrangement was the frequent breakdown of direct telephone contacts. The cases we are referring to involved children who were unable or unwilling to come to the phone, or whose relatives insisted on taking messages rather than letting mothers talk directly with their children.

The children, therefore, had experiences of settlement that were different from those of their parents because they had another ruptured attachment with which to deal. 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 (for example, their grandmothers or aunts). Where it was not possible for the child to be with the new caregivers, the reunification with the mothers represented a second rupture of attachment. This dual experience of loss also has been 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 and 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, in the separations examined in this research project, there often were permanent shifts in the family configuration, and, in particular, in the persons who were central in decision-making around the children in these family networks. Parents often lost their role as ultimate decision-makers; it was not rare to find a degree of power and authority reverting to the grandparents. Commonly, however, one did not see the grandparents exercising the same close discipline as had the parents; thus the children, of necessity, became more self directed. At re-unification, these configurations frequently gave rise to further problems, since the parent or parents may well have not seen the child for several years; in effect they had become almost strangers. The child's willingness and ability to re-attach was called into question, since the 'reunification,' was, in effect, a second major rupture of the child's attachment. One sign of that possible inability to re-attach would be made manifest if the child's could never again make him or herself fully subject to the parent's authority and discipline.

f) Use of Services

A number of mothers reported extreme barriers to their utilization of various types 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 alfrente 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,"which might best be described as a bias against those with immigrant paperwork. Situations associated with gaining "status-in-waiting" also have been found to create barriers in accessing services and resources, which can lead to marginalization (see also Ali, Taraban, and Gill 2003; Government of Ontario 2005; Lessard and Ku 2003; Omidvar and 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 should have entitlements such services under provincial and federal law, as well as by virtue of international treaties to which Canada is a signatory (Martin 2001; United Nations 1990). Children in Ontario are legally entitled to attend school under section 49.1 of the *Education Act* (Government of Ontario, 1990, 2004), regardless of their legal status. Yet, evidence suggests that they are frequently denied enrolment because of a specification in the federal *Immigration Act* which requires possession of a student authorization document, or evidence of the student's identity, immunization status, and residence (Ali, Taraban, and Gill 2003; TDSB 2004). In spite of the Department of Justice document, Martin (2001) has argued that, as a matter of constitutional law, the provincial *Education Act* should govern school admission policies. Unfortunately, this provincial responsibility has not been honoured by some Ontario school boards.

Persons who are refugee claimants and in a state of "status in waiting" often have experienced difficulties in accessing services and supports. There is no direct funding for agencies to support people who are caught in this situation. Services funded by Immigration Canada must ask for "landing papers" before their employees are able to work with clients; therefore, many settlement services are not accessible to these families. Even landed refugees remain in a type of "legal limbo" until they are granted permanent resident status, and, even then, some continue to encounter 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 often are required when accessing various services, including employment, social assistance, and healthcare (Coates and Hayward, 2004; Brouwer, 2004).

For one mother in our study, the barrier to accessing 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 allowing her to have access to a home visiting program, such as the Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program

(Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care 2005) that easily could have been modified to focus on the needs of immigrant children. The cost of childcare is prohibitive for many families. In fact, Toronto's Neighbourhood Information Post recently indicated it has seen "a dramatic increase in requests for … subsidized childcare" (NIP 2005). Service-providers in the Chinese community have found 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 make use of 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.[5]

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. These 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 to their home countries.

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[5] 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 then full legal status in Canada.

Jamás yo voy a decirle a alguien "mi hijo se ge 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 person I can tell is the pediatrician, 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 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 so 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 and Freire, 1996). That study found that the providers did not know and did not ask about the situations. In fact, 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 about their children's well-being 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 considering 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.

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 (United Nations 2005).

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 both mothers and their 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 in transnational, multi-local situations faced many obstacles and, therefore, either bore extreme stress or, in a few cases, had to relinquish care-giving roles by sending their 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 either were 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 their 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. Moreover, they 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 utilize 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 about some crucial issues. Working mothers in our sample seldom were recognized as being in need of social support, regardless of their legal status. However, mothers who had less-than-full legal status did not have access to social support or did not approach service providers 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 screens of social service agencies.

This study had a number of limitations, including a lack of precise 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 had been or remained separated from their children because they were in their countries of origin were not included in the sample. A larger sample size certainly would have allowed us to include both male and female 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 was directly related to the process of migration, and where either children or their primary caregivers leave their countries of origin, resulting in physical distance between mothers and their 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude this report with a series of concrete recommendations for policy-makers, service-providers, and families. We believe the implementation of these recommendations could help to 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 (for example, 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 (for example, 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 religious institutions, especially local congregations and their clergy, 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 their 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 services to deal with situations in which problem is apparently 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 (for example, clergy, service-providers, guidance counselors, settlement workers).

- Organize group sessions for members of transnational, multi-local families to get together for mutual support, information exchange, and social occasions.

- Distribute information about local services for children and parents in the home languages of the people in the 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 about 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 time lines 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 Member of Transnational, Multi-Local 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, bed-wetting) 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.

- 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.

Policy makers, service providers, and families all need to re consider their roles in the difficult processes of family separation and re-unification. In particular, policy makers should become aware of the factual situation, and not consider leaving it aside as a form of 'benign neglect.' Situations do not necessarily work out optimally, especially where policy makers and service providers are operating in the dark. The former need to focus more attention on removing barriers to reunification. As for service providers, there is a special need for them to question the treatment of the family unit in Canada as semi-autonomous. Any assumption, for instance, that because there is a mother with children, that that household is under that mother's authority, may not always be justified. Social workers, and others, who provide services to or assist or teach members of transnational, multi-local families need to look at the larger picture, outside of Canada, and consider

the possibility that power and authority may not mainly be exercised by the apparent head of (Canadian) household, but by persons living outside the country. Moreover, service providers would do well to investigate the causes of the present family disposition, including, the possibility of wife abuse. Furthermore, they must abandon the tendency to think that needs diminish upon 'reunification.' For their part, adult members of transnational, multi-local families must make exceptional efforts to preserve ties both between parents and children and with other parents and the community. They need to find out about social services and avail themselves of them, including after reunification. There is reason to hypothesize that adult family members will learn and cooperate with service providers, provided that the latter are not seen as a threat and really know what their situation is. Service providers, especially those with the same language and culture, can do much to make the families feel safe and welcome and to ensure that their difficulties become properly understood. Families do need to develop a sense of trust, but that can only flourish in a situation in which service providers are able to demonstrate both understanding and an ability to help bring about specific outcomes in the families' best interests.

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