

MIGRANT MOTHERS

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Risking it all for their families

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For some poor families in the developing world, a devastating choice may face them: a choice between living in deep poverty and splitting up the family. At least one parent, usually the mother, might move to another more affluent country to earn higher wages for her family. She often sends the majority of her earnings back to her family so they can enjoy a better life. For example, Rowena Bautista earns \$750 each month in the United States and sends \$400 to her children in the Philippines (Hochschild 18). Food, shelter, and education are all something often taken for granted in developed countries, but are all reasons why a mother from the Philippines might live and work in the United States, Hong Kong, or another foreign location where wages are higher, for instance. No matter how necessary this migration might be for a family's basic necessities and wellbeing, a migrant worker and her family risk suffering through numerous hardships. Migrant work could lead to several negative consequences for the worker, including family troubles, abuse, and health issues.

One negative consequence that migrant work might have is family trauma. This mainly affects the children. Children's support systems often include their mother as the first person they seek help from. When a child's mother is seemingly ripped away from the family, this can understandably be devastating to the whole family. Children are understandably upset when a parent leaves the household, especially for years at a time like migrant mothers often do. Some children might feel abandoned by their mother, and therefore feel resentful. Jeek Pereno, for example, grew up while his mother



was away working in another country, and he harbors many negative feelings about his mother; he feels abandoned, resentful, and questions his mother's love (Parreñas 44-45).

The pain that children of migrant workers feel is not just surface-level sadness. Children need strong parental figures in their lives to develop healthy attachments and to be happy, successful adults (Ijzendoorn). According to "Nurturing and Attachment" from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a "consistent, caring adult in the early years" can lead to numerous positive effects in a child's life, such as higher academic achievement, better behavior, better relationships with peers, and better coping ability for stress. This "consistent, caring adult" that the Child Welfare Information Gateway describes, may be difficult to come by if a child's mother is in another country, especially if the father also works or is otherwise not there to raise the child. There are some protective measures a family can take, though. "Children who... received good surrogate parenting managed to concentrate on their studies and in the end to fare much better" (Parreñas 46). Sometimes an aunt or grandmother might help raise a migrant mother's children as a surrogate parent. However, a relative might have her own children to take care of, as well as any of their own obligations and priorities, such as their job. A child who has a migrant mother may not have another adult to bond with. A healthy bond with a nurturing adult is important for a child's development and success ("Nurturing and Attachment"), so children of migrant workers could be negatively impacted for years to come.

Josephine Perera and her family are one example of the importance of an early, strong bond between child and parent. Josephine Perera's family is in Sri Lanka while she takes care of a two-year-old in Greece; she has been away from her family for a decade (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 1-2). She has three children back in Sri Lanka, and two of them have emotional or behavioral problems (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2). According to Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2), Josephine's youngest child is withdrawn, does not do well in school and starts fights, and Josephine's middle child has attempted suicide

three times in her adolescence. However, her oldest child seems to be doing fine; he drives a bus for a living and has no hard feelings towards his mother (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2), possibly because he was already 13 when his mother left. He was able to grow up for the most part with his mother in his life, and that could be why he is the most well-adjusted of the three siblings. The eldest child had a chance to form a healthy bond with his mother, and so he reaps the rewards of a strong attachment. His siblings were not so lucky.

Abuse is another potential effect that can harm a migrant worker. Migrant workers are often illegal immigrants and may not even speak the language or know the immigration laws of the country in which they are employed, so they are a particularly vulnerable population. A family who employs migrant workers can easily abuse them because of this vulnerability. A family may threaten a migrant worker with deportation if they are in the country illegally, and the migrant worker would not be able to stand up to abuse because of that. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse can all impact a migrant worker at the hands of the family who employs her. It is estimated that around 7.4 percent of migrant workers who live with their employers face emotional or physical abuse, and in reality, there is a chance this number could be higher (Green and Ayalon).

Emotional abuse includes any non-physical abuse that could cause trauma. Emotional abuse could include humiliation, such as forcing a worker to don a dog collar and sleep outside (Zarembka 147). Emotional distress could also come from lack of privacy, which occurs when a live-in migrant worker is forced to sleep in a children's room or a living room (Constable 123). Verbal abuse is another form of emotional abuse (Ehrenreich 93), which could consist of anything from insults and rude remarks to screaming and berating the worker. One migrant worker, Tigris Bekele, had an employer who "forced her to cut her hair and stop wearing makeup, threatening to kill Tigris if she had sex with her husband" (Zarembka 148). This example of abuse has layers of degradation, coercion, dehumanization, and threats weaved throughout, and this worker will never forget the psychological abuse against her. The idea of emotional abuse might

evoke that old saying in our heads that sticks and stones can break our bones but words will never hurt us, but in fact, emotional abuse can understandably cause a lot of long-term trauma.

Just like emotional abuse, physical abuse can take many different forms as well. Migrant workers may face physical assault from their employers. For example, one teen kicked his nanny for not making food for him (Ehrenreich 93). On the more extreme end of physical abuse, Ehrenreich (93) mentions slavery, forced labor, and sexual abuse, including one migrant worker named Elizabeth Senghor who was forced to work long hours and was not paid. Another migrant worker named Marie Jose Perez was filled with hope as she took a plane from Bolivia to the United States, but her employer took her passport and made Marie his slave (Zarembka 142-143); she worked long hours for only one dollar a day. Her employer's friend raped her, and her employer refused to let her seek medical care (Zarembka 143). Ruth Gnizako was a migrant worker from West Africa, and was frequently beat by her employers and was not allowed to go back home; she was also institutionalized against her will and given psychoactive drugs (Zarembka 143). Sexual abuse is another form of physical abuse. Tigris's employer, for example, tried to grope and kiss her against her will (Zarembka 148). Slavery, beatings, and sexual abuse as well as emotional abuse are all risks that migrant workers face in order to provide for their children.

In addition to family trauma and abuse from employers, a migrant worker could face a variety of health issues. Malnutrition is one such issue that may come up with migrant workers. Some migrant workers are fed scraps from their employers (Zarembka 142). They may also be given time to eat. Ehrenreich (96) describes her time with a maid company, detailing how the maids barely had time to eat; they were only allowed ten minutes to buy and eat lunch at a convenience store during their nine hour work shifts. Many migrant workers make minimum wage or less and may not be able to afford much food, let alone healthy and nutritious food. Malnutrition can pave the way for muscle deterioration, respiratory failure,

decreased stamina, and fertility issues ("Malnutrition"). Malnutrition can also slow down the immune system, leading to an increased risk of illness and infection ("Malnutrition").

High levels of stress are also a common health problem in migrant workers. Most migrant workers work more than fourteen hours a day (Constable 124). That means they only have ten hours or less for recreation, sleeping, eating, and resting, so it is likely that migrant workers are extremely stressed. Without time to rest and relieve stress, this built-up stress can lead to a myriad of health issues. High levels of stress over long periods of time, such as the years at a time that migrant workers might be employed in other countries, can weaken the immune system and lead to health issues such as depression, anxiety, arthritis, psoriasis, heart disease, diabetes, and more ("What Happens"). Migrant workers who face a lot of stress may be more susceptible to viruses and other contagious illnesses as well because of their weakened immune system.

Both stress and malnutrition may make migrant workers more susceptible to disease. This is further aggravated by the lack of money. Migrant workers may not be able to afford medical treatment. If they are able to afford medical care, migrant workers may fear deportation if they do try to seek treatment, especially if they are in the country illegally. Migrant workers could also face health issues related to abuse they might face, such as serious injuries from physical abuse and STDs from sexual abuse. Overall, migrant workers face a multitude of negative health outcomes related to stress, malnutrition, and abuse.

Is being a migrant worker worth all of the possible negative outcomes? It depends on what the mother and her family values. Does she want to make sure her children can see her every night, or does she want to secure a better future for her children via education, shelter, and food? These are both trade-offs, so there is no one right answer. Migrant work is a tough decision for any mother to make, especially when neither option is ideal for her children's wellbeing. Family trauma, abuse, and health problems are all issues that

a migrant worker may have to face in her attempt to provide her children with better living conditions, and those are risks that a desperate mother is often willing to take for the sake of her children. Mothers around the globe sacrifice for their children every day; migrant mothers might just have to sacrifice a little bit more than most.

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