

Remittances and the Transnational Family in South-East Asia

There is a substantial body of literature on the impact of remittances on household, community and national development in the global south. One of the main precipitating factors for migration at the household level is access to earnings that provide for subsistence and future investment in left-behind family members. Prior research provides inconsistent support for the effects of migrant remittances on those left behind with some studies suggesting positive impacts on health (Gulati 1993), housing (Jones and Kittisuksathit 2003), and schooling (Battistela and Gastardo-Conaco 1998; Hadi 2001; Sofranko and Idris 1999), while others suggest that migration may result in worsening health outcomes such as poor nutrition because of a lack of remittances (Asis 2003; Hadi 1999), heavier workloads due to the absence of key family members and the introduction of communicable diseases (Kongsin 1997; Smith-Estelle and Gruskin 2003; Weerakoon 1997). There is a general tendency in the literature to assume that left-behind children are especially vulnerable to negative effects where their mother is working abroad (Gamburd 2003; Hugo 2000; Jolly, Bell and Narayanaswamy 2003). Where care is inadequate or remittances do not benefit children, nutrition, health service usage and schooling may suffer (Kuhn 2005). To date there has been no systematic investigation of the incidence and use of parental remittances within left-behind families with children. The CHAMPSEA (Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia) study seeks to fill this gap by providing new information about remittance receipt and use among transnational families with children under the age of twelve in South-East Asia.

Decisions about how to use remittances may be influenced by factors other than the gender of the migrant parent. Some occupational niches and migrant destinations may require higher placement fees resulting in debt that must be paid off (Sofranko AJ and Idris K 1999). Features of the national migration experience such as duration of transnational migrant flows are likely to influence current conditions; during the initial stage of national migration experience families of relatively higher socio-economic status are more likely to participate in transnational labour migration, and the use of remittances may reflect consumption and savings patterns of this relatively more prosperous demographic group (Brown and Jimenez 2008). Overtime as the incidence of migration expands to include less prosperous households, differences in the use of remittances may reflect need and preferences of wider socio-economic strata. The current study uses recent data from the CHAMPSEA survey collected in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam to investigate remittances in the transnational family. The CHAMPSEA countries were chosen to reflect variability in the duration of national migration experience and migrant population characteristic such as gender composition and legal status which offers a rich comparative framework to examine the following questions: (1) Are there differences in the nature and incidence of remittances based on gender of the migrant parent? (2) Does remittance use vary by the gender of the migrant parent?

Multivariate logistic regression models are used to examine variation in the incidence of remittances and self-reported use of remittances among mother- and father-migrant transnational households. After controlling for individual parent and household characteristics including duration of migration, household wealth, parent occupation and country of residence, findings indicate significant differences between incidence of remittance sending by gender of the migrant parent, and that specific uses of remittances appear sensitive to the gender of the migrant parent.

Transnational households with migrant fathers are almost three times more likely to report recent remittance receipt (in the past six months) compared to migrant mother households. Remittances are less likely to be used to meet subsistence needs and debt repayment in mother migrant households providing some support for negative effects of mother migration on families who are left behind. However, the lack of differences between mother and father migrant households in other key areas such as investment in schooling counteracts prevailing notions of a pervasive care crisis in the region. Of further note are significant between country differences in the overall use of remittances for debt repayment with transnational households in Vietnam three times more likely to endorse this item than households in the Philippines or Indonesia. This suggests that the national migration experience in Vietnam is not necessarily following the model suggested by Brown and Jimenez (2008) as less prosperous households join in transnational migration earlier than would be expected, possibly reflecting the socialist legacy of Vietnam. This merits further study. Policy planning related to transnational labour migration should consider the use of public information campaigns to counteract pervasive gender bias of transnational migration households, and also consider closer examination of the role of debt occurrence and subsequent debt burden among transnational households.

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