

WAITING

FOR DADDY'S CALL. SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE CHILDREN OF MIGRANT FATHERS

ESPERANDO LA LLAMADA DE PAPÁ. RELACIONES SOCIALES EN LOS HIJOS DE PADRES MIGRANTES

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ABSTRACT

Paternal migration in transnational contexts has affected both economic conditions and family emotional bonds, leading to reconfigurations in the children's psycho-emotional development and in the caregiving, roles assumed by mothers. This study aimed to examine how the father's migration influences the development of social relationships, personal capabilities, and the psycho-emotional well-being of children or wives in transnational families. The analysis considered the socioeconomic conditions of the environment, the quality of emotional bonds maintained, and the role of information and communication technologies. The research was guided by the Capability Approach and combined a literature review of recent studies with fieldwork based on interviews and surveys. The findings revealed that, although remittances improve economic conditions, they do not compensate for emotional consequences. From a psychosocial perspective, feelings of abandonment and loneliness were identified among children, along with weakened family bonds due to migration or divorce in most cases. In fact, in nearly all families, the separation occurred at a very early age, and the migrant father is barely remembered. It was concluded that child well-being depends on the integral development of emotional and relational capabilities. Therefore, longitudinal and comparative research is recommended to further explore transnational family dynamics and their specific characteristics in different regions of Ecuador.

Keywords:

Paternal migration, Capabilities, Transnational families, Social relationships, Divorce.

RESUMEN

La migración paterna en entornos transnacionales ha impactado tanto las condiciones económicas como los lazos afectivos familiares, al provocar reconfiguraciones en el desarrollo psicoemocional de los hijos y en los roles de cuidado asumidos por las madres. Por tal motivo, este estudio se orientó en examinar, cómo la migración del padre afecta el desarrollo de las relaciones sociales, las capacidades personales y el bienestar psicoemocional de los hijos o las esposas en familias transnacionales. Para ello, se consideraron las condiciones socioeconómicas del entorno, la calidad de los vínculos afectivos mantenidos, así como el papel de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación. Para el desarrollo de la investigación, se empleó el Enfoque de Capacidades, así como la combinación de la revisión bibliográfica de estudios recientes con el trabajo de campo basado en entrevistas y encuestas. Los resultados revelaron que, aunque las remesas mejoran las condiciones económicas, no compensan las consecuencias emocionales. Desde una perspectiva psicossocial, se evidenciaron sentimientos de abandono y soledad en los menores, así como vínculos familiares debilitados debido a la migración o el divorcio en la mayoría de los casos. De hecho, en casi todas

las familias la separación se produjo a edades muy tempranas y apenas recuerdan a la persona que migró. En consecuencia, se concluyó que el bienestar infantil depende del desarrollo integral de las capacidades emocionales y relacionales. Por tanto, se recomienda realizar investigaciones longitudinales y comparativas para profundizar en las dinámicas familiares transnacionales y sus particularidades en diferentes regiones de Ecuador.

Palabras clave: Migración paterna, Capacidades, Familias transnacionales, Relaciones sociales, Divorcio.

INTRODUCTION

Global migration has been the subject of numerous studies from economic, social, and cultural perspectives. Among these, one of the most extensively examined topics has been the sending of remittances, due to their impact on the economies of receiving countries. Likewise, transnational practices have attracted the attention of various studies by analyzing how migrants maintain ties with their countries of origin (Lee & Macías-Ayala, 2025).

In Ecuador, the Andean family structure has been influenced by transculturation over the past two decades, particularly from a psychological perspective. Although these families are less permeable to change than those in other regions of the country, they are also experiencing a state of crisis. Consequently, they have had to adapt not only in terms of customs, habits, and beliefs, but also in the values and educational projects of the family group (López & Salcán, 2025).

Likewise, authoritarianism no longer constitutes the main characteristic, and permissiveness has become exacerbated. In fact, parents often feel distressed, confused, and dissatisfied, displaying ambivalence in their parenting (Esteve et al., 2022). Moreover, the number of broken households is increasing, and couples generally do not stabilize their relationships in a long-term perspective. Nuclear families are less numerous, yet the notion of the father as a ruler and provider persists—more aligned with the instrumental than the expressive paternal role, since emotional expression is still predominantly assigned to the mother as a feature of transgenerational family learning. On the other hand, a large number of families have become multigenerational groups, sharing the same social space (Becca et al., 2025). Regarding parenting styles identified in the Andean region, three main modalities have been recognized:

- **Traditional style:** Based on a set of norms and customs that define the roles of men and women both within the household and in society. In this model, the father is

the provider and responsible for the economic support of the family, while the mother is in charge of child-rearing and maintaining a harmonious home environment.

- **Transitional style:** Characterized by a more flexible approach to upbringing, in which family responsibilities vary according to circumstances, although parental authority remains present and is not necessarily questioned.
- **Alternative styles:** These depart from traditional rigidities by granting greater autonomy to children and promoting more horizontal relationships within the family nucleus.

Despite these differences in parenting styles, Andean families share common traits such as their large size and strong sense of solidarity. Although the father and mother remain central figures of authority, there is a gradual shift away from the authoritarian and disciplinary practices of the past. This phenomenon, although more pronounced in regions such as the Ecuadorian coast, is also evident in the Andes, where more open, less hierarchical family models with shared roles are emerging (Fourment et al., 2021). In these new family configurations, the absence of one parent and the exchange of parental responsibilities are becoming more frequent, thereby redefining the dynamics of authority, affection, and shared responsibility within the household.

Indeed, most migration studies have focused on the figure of the migrant, prioritizing their experience and perspective (Tello & Sánchez, 2025). However, transnational families are composed not only of those who migrate but also of those who remain. Analyzing the latter makes it possible to understand the transformations in social relationships resulting from separation—an essential aspect for evaluating the migration phenomenon. Moreover, by incorporating a perspective centered on those who stay behind, it becomes possible to analyze social relationships in terms of emotional bonds, family roles, and the daily reorganization imposed by the absence of the migrant father.

Therefore, the present study uses the Capability Approach to examine how paternal migration affects the development of social relationships, personal capabilities, and the psycho-emotional well-being of children or wives in transnational families. To this end, the analysis considers the socioeconomic conditions of the environment, the quality of the emotional bonds maintained, as well as the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

From a gender perspective, these social relationships acquire different meanings depending on whether the father or mother migrates. In the particular case of this study, the analysis focuses on paternal migration and its impact on the relationship with children and the spouse

who remain in the country of origin (Carranza, 2022). This approach enables the observation of how family structures reconfigure while generating new forms of interaction and social resistance to distance.

Understanding these dynamics proves relevant because social relationships constitute an essential component of subjective well-being and individual agency capacity. To analyze this phenomenon, the study proposes applying the Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, which offers an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for examining human development beyond economic indicators.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research combined a literature review with fieldwork based on interviews and surveys (Zhang et al., 2023). The review focused on recent studies concerning family transformations in transnational migration contexts, with emphasis on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, theories about transnational families, and affective bonds in prolonged separation situations (Williams & Daniel, 2021). Analytical-synthetic methods were employed to evaluate documentary sources and integrate their contributions to the methodological design and interpretation of results.

The study was conducted in the cities of Biblián, Sigüigüa, and Quito, and analyzed social relationships in transnational families, particularly father-child bonds, marriage, and family structure. The Capability Approach was adopted as the central methodological framework, which posits that well-being is not defined solely by available resources, but by the actual capabilities people have to choose and realize the ways of life they value.

Through interviews and surveys applied to families, mostly with fathers absent due to migration, the social opportunities and functions of mothers and children in family reorganization processes were evaluated. From this perspective, social capabilities are understood as effective freedoms that enable individuals to develop in an environment that either facilitates or restricts their meaningful decisions and actions.

RESULTS-DISCUSSION

Family dynamics in transnational migration.

International migration has profoundly reconfigured family dynamics in countries of origin such as Ecuador. Prolonged physical separation between parents and children introduces challenges in the exercise of parenthood and in the organization of childcare. In this process, women assume a leading role, both as migrants who economically

support the household through remittances, and as caregivers in the absence of other parental members.

Transnational family relationships are sustained through "kinship work" mediated by communication technologies, which allows the preservation of affective bonds, although it does not substitute physical presence. Remittances, in addition to guaranteeing material subsistence, reconfigure power hierarchies within the household by increasing the autonomy of women who manage these resources.

Nevertheless, these configurations are not exempt from tensions; indeed, parental absence, both due to migration and marital separation, fragments affective bonds and weakens the authority of the absent parent, affecting the emotional well-being of children and adolescents. In many cases, children assume roles that exceed their age, which negatively impact their development. Furthermore, prolonged disconnection leads to emotional distancing, family disintegration, and the risk of social exclusion.

From a structural perspective, migration responds to economic and social factors that push individuals to seek better living conditions abroad. However, on a relational level, it involves constant negotiation between material commitment and affective responsibility. Transnational families operate as adaptive systems, where resilience depends on the balance between economic support, symbolic presence, and local care networks.

In sum, family transformations induced by migration do not constitute a total rupture of bonds, but rather a transnational reconfiguration of them, which evidences both the fragility and agency capacity of dispersed families. Therefore, these dynamics require understanding through an analysis that articulates the structural, affective, and symbolic dimensions of the migratory experience.

Social Relations in Transnational Families: An Analysis from the Capability Approach

To understand family transformations in transnational migration contexts, this study applied the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen. This framework redefines the analysis of well-being and social justice by focusing not only on individuals' material resources but also on their real capabilities to act and live according to their own values and aspirations. Sen distinguishes between *functioning* (actual achievements, such as being educated or having a cohesive family) and *capabilities* (the substantive freedoms to achieve those desired functionings).

Within the family sphere, this approach examines how individuals—particularly women, children, and adolescents—navigate constraints or real possibilities in assuming parental roles and making affective decisions. These

capabilities are especially conditioned in environments marked by paternal absence or family structure reconfigurations. Thus, migration is analyzed not merely as an economic or demographic phenomenon but as a process that differentially impacts essential human freedoms, individual agency, and life opportunities among family members.

The collected data also revealed transformations in family and social bonds following the father's departure, particularly when this separation lasted over a decade, disrupting the original family structure. In many cases, the relationship with the migrant father was reduced to sporadic remittances, while emotional communication became scarce or nonexistent. Interview and survey results showed that some children barely remembered their fathers or associated them with family conflicts or distant figures who had formed new families abroad. The lack of emotional support and diminished affective contact fostered feelings of abandonment and loneliness in the children, especially during adolescence.

Under these circumstances, children formed their strongest bonds primarily with their mothers and school peers, creating limited yet meaningful social support networks. In fact, the study found that these children's social relationships tended to center around school environments and virtual networks, with digital interactions frequently serving as their primary form of socialization. However, this virtual sociability did not fully compensate for paternal absence or the limited communication at home. Mothers, meanwhile, shouldered a dual burden of childcare and financial provision, which affected the quality of time they could share with their children.

In cases where divorce occurred without migration, children maintained more stable social relationships with both parents. Although contact was limited, direct interaction reduced feelings of abandonment and supported better development of social skills. In contrast, when divorce followed the father's migration, emotional bonds deteriorated significantly - both with the absent father and with the mother, especially when she had to work long hours.

Despite these differences, the capability approach revealed that children didn't respond uniformly to paternal absence. Some developed stronger social skills, while others withdrew into isolation or shyness - outcomes that depended not only on personal disposition but also on their emotional environment and the type of relationship maintained with the migrant father.

The study also found significant variation in communication frequency among transnational families. In the best cases, weekly contact was maintained primarily through

phone calls or social media (WhatsApp). However, this communication typically diminished over time, particularly when parents formed new families abroad, further deepening emotional distance and weakening bonds with children in their home country.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that paternal migration does not represent an exclusively negative phenomenon for children, as remittances have been shown to improve household economic conditions (Iosim et al., 2022). However, from a psychosocial perspective, previous research confirms that the father's physical absence has caused significant emotional impacts on children, who develop feelings of abandonment and loneliness (Valencia & Moreno, 2024). In some cases, children have even experienced a permissive environment characterized by effortless access to resources. This duality of outcomes highlights the complexity of the phenomenon and suggests that economic benefits do not fully compensate for emotional losses.

This investigation has also observed that parental separation, particularly when abrupt and without proper preparation, intensifies children's emotional difficulties within the family environment. Children whose parents divorced following paternal migration showed stronger feelings of abandonment and limited communication with the absent father, resulting in weakened emotional bonds. Additionally, cases of parental alienation syndrome were identified, demonstrating negative impacts on children's emotional health by fostering negative perceptions and rejection toward the absent parent. These findings partially differ from previous studies that minimized migration's impact when frequent communication was maintained, though they align with research emphasizing the effects of parental conflict and father-child relationship quality (Boado & Ferrer, 2022).

Regarding social relationships, the data indicates that children have maintained normal family and school connections, but with an overall decrease in socialization. The strengthening of emotional networks with relatives and friends has served as a crucial resource for caregiving mothers, yet hasn't sufficiently compensated for paternal absence in children's comprehensive development. These findings align with literature emphasizing household role reorganization and expanded maternal responsibilities, which have contributed to closer mother-child bonds while also generating additional emotional and social burdens (Venta et al., 2021; de Cosío, 2024).

A central aspect of this research has been evaluating the impact of ICTs, particularly applications like WhatsApp and other digital platforms, on communication between migrant fathers and their children. According to Larrinaga-Bidegain (2024), technologies have facilitated connections between countries of origin and destination. However, they have also created contradictory expectations about constant availability and virtual proximity.

Moreover, time and space have complicated cross-border communication, especially in families with disabled members who face challenges synchronizing work and family schedules (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). Consequently, these limitations in accessing and effectively using ICTs have contributed to paternal absence negatively affecting children's emotional and social well-being. Additionally, children have adopted protective roles toward their mothers, taking on emotional responsibilities beyond their years and demonstrating vulnerability stemming from paternal absence (Sierra et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, this study has confirmed the usefulness of Amartya Sen's capability approach for understanding child well-being in transnational families. As Tello & Sánchez (2025) have determined, well-being depends not only on economic resources and educational/social opportunities but also on developing capabilities that enable people to use these resources to lead valued lives. The findings show that while remittances provide material resources, paternal absence and limited communication hinder children's development of fundamental social and emotional capabilities (Manobanda et al., 2024). Therefore, economic resources alone don't guarantee comprehensive well-being; fostering conditions for children to fully develop their capabilities remains essential.

Furthermore, results suggest interventions should focus on strengthening emotional communication between migrant fathers and children by facilitating effective ICT access and use in technologically limited communities (Salma et al., 2021). Additionally, supporting mothers in their expanded roles and promoting social support networks to mitigate the emotional consequences of paternal absence is essential (Račaitė et al., 2021). Such measures would improve children's psychological and social well-being while reducing observed inequality gaps.

Finally, this study recognizes limitations regarding socioeconomic and cultural environment heterogeneity and varying technology access affecting result generalizability. Thus, we recommend longitudinal research to observe family and social dynamics over time, along with

comparative studies across regions to better understand transnational family dynamics' specificities.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of social relationships among migrant children in the cities included in this study has shown variable patterns. Indeed, the impact differed across families remaining in the country of origin. Most children growing up without their fathers due to migration gradually lose their familial bonds over time, forcing them to develop social functions (understood as each person's role within their social group, where they perform actions for their own benefit and others') and skills without their father's physical presence. In many transnational families, the connection with migrant fathers was reduced to economic remittances without any other contact. In other cases, maintained through social media and digital communication, though these represented a minority.

This research demonstrates that paternal migration creates a duality in child well-being, where economic benefits from remittances don't fully compensate for emotional impacts caused by the father's physical absence. While ICTs have facilitated long-distance communication between migrant fathers and children, time zone differences and spatial separation complicate cross-border contact due to challenges synchronizing work and family schedules, negatively affecting children's emotional and social well-being.

Amartya Sen's capability approach has proven valuable as a theoretical framework for analyzing child well-being in transnational families, emphasizing that economic resources alone cannot ensure children's comprehensive development. Therefore, creating conditions that strengthen social-emotional skills, promote affective communication, and consolidate social support networks becomes essential. These findings represent significant progress in understanding migration's multidimensional nature and suggest the need for interventions addressing psychosocial consequences of paternal absence while optimizing technology use in socioeconomically constrained communities.

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