

Child poverty is one of the main drivers of migration, but what happens to families when children are left behind by migrating parents? What impact does it have on society as a whole? This was the subject of a major conference organised by Eurochild to promote the network [www. \*children\* \*leftbehind\*.eu](http://www.childrenleftbehind.eu)

There is an increased feminisation of migration out of many countries both EU and neighbourhood countries - women leaving, not to be reunited with their husbands, but for finding work. In many cases they often leave their children behind in the care of others. On the other hand, when men migrate, they are often not attached to a family, or they abandon the family. Often migration takes place in the context of problems already existing at home - male unemployment leading regularly to alcoholism and often family break up.

This is linked to care drain related to transnational families, and the impact on welfare state in the home countries. As women are main care givers in families, their departure had strong impact on social cohesion. These already tend to be very poor and fragile in countries of origin and this migratory impact is very damaging. For example we heard that in Romania about 17% of minors left behind were benefitting from public social services.

The representative from Ukraine declared the need to bring this problem to the political level; looking for partners in local and regional government. For now the plight of these children passes somewhat under the political radar.

What effect does it have on the children? Often minors left behind do not describe self as victim, but express pride, in their parents and in themselves. They emphasise the fact that their parent left to improve the life of the child, and to allow them to get a good education. They say that it teaches them responsibility which a good thing.

Alexandru Gulei of *Albero della vita*, a charity, explained what migration can mean in the country of origin, in this case Romania. Before the overthrow of communism, there was no free movement: a person could only run. It was highly regarded to have escaped. Once the boundary restricting movement was gone, between 1989-2007, over 2.5m Romanians moved abroad either temporarily or permanently. In fact nothing has changed in terms of migration since Romanian accession to the EU. People still migrate and leave kids behind. Indeed, migration of parents can be regarded as a positive thing, a model of success. Many older people will say, I'm so proud of my son he is in Italy, or, all my children are in Spain.

Police report that there were increasing numbers of children, without supervision, are committing more crimes. The effect of the street - often children who are away from parental support and control fall into making some money in contraband – so they are not experiencing material poverty, but they do not have love and support of parents and feel abandoned so develop psycho-social problems. They become easy prey to drug pushers, for example. A study presented to the conference showed, that migration although it has serious negative consequences, still has positive view.

Families see it as a sacrifice which they can bear for a while because it's in the interest of the family. They want more or a better life for themselves and their children. Parents are unaware of the negative consequences of migration on their children's mental health. They do not imagine that they will be vulnerable to abuse or neglect, nor the deterioration of family relations which can have a lasting negative impact on the child themselves.

This is reflected in the fact that, often, there is no preparation stage. The children are not consulted about the plan to migrate, and are not always informed about what will happen to them while the parents are away. Radoslaw Kozlowski from Poland pointed out that often the school is important - kids will look to teachers in absence of parents. They sadly don't always get it though.

What children need to know includes who is the person who will take care of them *in loco parentis*

how we parents and children communicate, how long the separation will last. Children inherit dysfunctional models of family relations, which is not necessarily positive - with regard to responsibility to one another. For example they can come to see it as 'normal' that a 12 year old is responsible for looking after a 7 year old and a 5 year old for several years.

What are NGOs able to do? In many countries of origin, there is little state support for projects to help children. The conference heard that NGOs are interviewing children, and trying to provide info on available support. One project involves linking children left behind with other mums and dads to create some kind of atmosphere that people find comforting environment. However, it was pointed out that while there are no NGOs working with people affected by this situation sitting at the discussion table to find ways to resolve it, we are losing out on a lot of useful expertise.

From a receiving country, Spain, Ms Asun Berne gave some views. . The labour market is the starting place because migration flows ultimately come down to the economy. Trade Unions are being supporting with activities such as language training and information about rights. Several speakers mentioned the importance of engaging the unions and employers associations because of their overwhelming impact in the labour market.

A representative from another receiving country, France, presented what civil society is doing there to help the situation. This includes producing practical, non-judgemental guides for the parents whose kids are in another country, with titles such as *Your rights in France, My child is home alone*.

They also provide counselling and advice. They try to raise profile of the problem, and avoid silence on the subject, helping to reduce negative impact.

When discussing the EU's role in handling this issue, Jana Hainsworth the secretary general of eurochild, said that there were some contradictions in EU policy strategy. She said that the heavy focus on jobs and mobility may be short sighted and that it was important to focus on the long term costs and benefits with respect to human relations. She contended that economic

savings cannot be made everywhere, that the EU has responsibilities and that families and children have to be a priority.