Adolescents who stay, parents who migrate: Gender inequalities, resilience and coping strategies in Tajikistan

Abstract

Studies on the consequences of migration often ignore the perspectives of children and adolescents who remain in the origin country while their migrant parents are absent. This is the case in Tajikistan, one of the poorest and most remittance-dependent countries in the world. Using a qualitative methodology, micro-ethnography, we interviewed eight teenagers aged between 12 and 18, in the city of Khorugh, Tajikistan, to explore the impact of migration from their perspective. Findings reveal that these adolescents "understand" the reasons for their parents' migration in a way that both gives coherence to this migration and invests young people with resilience and coping strategies. As a result, all the young people *naturalised* having to live with sadness, reflecting the "normalization" of this social cost in wider Tajik society. However, the experiences and coping strategies of those interviewed are gendered; boys were more likely to 'rationalise' their experience and be aloof; girls more likely to express emotional upset. In practical terms, boys also received more benefits from remittances while girls reported feeling overwhelmed by domestic chores expected of them. Through this study, we contribute to the recent literature on the lived experiences and agency of non-migrant teenagers.

Keywords

Left-behind children, micro-ethnography, Tajikistan, gender and youth, resilience and migration, coping strategies.

Introduction

After Tajikistan became independent from the USSR in 1991 and following a period of civil war and collapse of the economy, many Tajik people, especially males, migrated, mostly to the Russian Federation, for work. When a member of the family moves abroad this creates a left-behind population mostly comprised of children, women and older people, creating transnational families where care and emotional connections cross borders (Cebotari 2018). However, most migration studies fail to discuss the perspective of children and adolescents, one of the groups most affected by migration due to their age and limited social power (Boyden and Mann 2005, 3). This article analyses the gendered understandings, coping strategies and resilience of adolescents in Tajikistan who live with members of their extended family due to the migration of both parents. To explore *their* experiences, we deployed a youth-centred micro-ethnographic methodology.

Analysis of the existing literature on Tajik migration and children with absent migrant parents acknowledges that there are gender inequalities in both well-being and school performance, but also reveals several gaps in the research on this topic (Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013; Catrinescu et al. 2011; Cebotari 2018; Gatskova, Ivlevs, and Dietz 2017; Jaupart 2018; Nazridod 2014). Firstly, only a small number of studies address children's and young people's agency, their perceptions of migration and their own wellbeing; secondly, the existing research rarely focuses on gender; and thirdly – and

most importantly for this paper – we have not any study on Tajikistan that examine children's views from a gender perspective. This study attempts to fill these gaps.

We seek to answer two main research questions by studying the effect of the characteristics of teenagers' transnational lives in greater detail and by taking young people's own perceptions into account. Firstly, how do these adolescents experience the migration of both parents; how does it affect their well-being? Secondly, do boys' and girls' coping strategies and experiences differ?

Our study focuses on teenagers who are in school and both of whose parents are abroad. Given that Tajik out-migration is male-dominated and thus most children stay with their mothers, we considered the hypothesis that the experience of having both parents abroad might introduce a different perspective on transnational migration. More precisely, we attempt to build a fuller picture of the lives of adolescents living with both parents abroad. As a small scale, in this qualitative study, the aim was to identify aspects of young people's lives which might then be explored in quantitative research on a larger scale. While this made the study more challenging, it also made it unique in its contribution to current research on this topic.

Firstly, we aimed to understand better the impact of particular characteristics – such as age (12-18 years old) and gender (four boys and four girls) – in the adolescents' transnational lives. Secondly, following the conclusion of a previous study that longer-term parental migration is positively associated with children's enrolment in school (Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013), we wanted to learn about the school children's own perspective on their parents' absence. To this end, we considered elements from two previous studies, Bennett et al's proposal that we should "understand under what circumstances children may be made vulnerable" in Tajikistan (2013, 12), together with

Nazridod's (2014) finding that children, where both parents migrated, reacted with sadness and depression, i.e. they became vulnerable.

The Tajikistani context

The Tajik civil war (1992-1997) resulted in a severe recession, socio-economic decline and falling GDP; average annual growth was negative between 1990 and 2001 (Mughal 2007, 6). Today the country remains one of the least developed in the world (UNDP 2018) and, according to The World Bank (2017), only 43 percent of the total working population are in the labor force. Of these, the majority have low-quality jobs in the informal sector – many of them seasonal or temporary. Women and youth are at disadvantage. The female labor force participation rate in 2013 was only 27 percent compared to 63 percent among males (World Bank 2017). In addition, 40% of young people are 'inactive', being neither in school nor employed.

Strong dependence on remittances from Tajiks working abroad

Against this background, families have increasingly relied on remittances from work abroad to provide an income. In 2013 Tajikistan had the highest dependence on remittances in the world, accounting for 50% of its total GDP. Although this had dropped to 31% by 2017 (World Bank 2019), Tajikistan still ranks 4th in the world.

Russia is the preferred country of migration; almost 75% (466,386 people) of Tajik migrants are employed there, seasonally or for longer periods. The remaining 26% of Tajik migrants go mainly to Kazakhstan (37,614), Europe, especially Germany (29,081), or the United States (4,725) (World Bank, 2018b). From a total population of 8.9 million people, 638,249 (7%) people live abroad. Research conducted by UNICEF in Tajikistan (Catrinescu et al. 2011) indicates that families with children are more likely to have a

migrant member – usually either one or both parents. Many are not able to take their family with them; as a result, a whole generation of children is growing up without the presence of one or more parents.

Portrayals of the split families: benefits and costs to the children/adolescents

Social scientists have recently begun researching the impact of migration on split families, connecting transnational parenthood and care arrangements to the wellbeing of 'left-behind' children (cf. Jordan and Graham 2012; Lam, Yeoh, and Hoang 2013; Mazzucato and Schans 2011). Most literature about migration's impact on children who stay with caregivers focuses on China and on developing countries, mainly the Philippines, Latin American, the Caribbean and Central Asian countries (Asis 2006; Boccagni 2013; Catrinescu et al. 2011; Cebotari, Siegel and Mazzucato 2016; Démurger and Xu 2015; Duque-Páramo 2012; D'Emilio et al. 2007; Jerves et al. 2018; Jingzhong 2011; Olwig 1999; Su et al. 2013).

Only a small number of researchers have focused on understanding the impact of parental labour migration on the children in Tajikistan (Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013; Catrinescu et al. 2011; Cebotari 2018; Gatskova, Ivlevs, and Dietz 2017; Jaupart 2018; Nazridod 2014). The current study adds to this. We have titled this paper "adolescents who stay, parents who migrate", rather than 'left-behind' children, in order to recognise the agency of the children we studied, following the insights of Mazzucato and Schans (2011) and Carling (2013). In the context of Tajikistan, Cebotari (2018) and Gatskova, Ivlevs and Dietz (2017) also support this shift in the transnational care paradigm and refer to children as those *who stay behind*, to avoid representing them as passive.

If we are to understand how children experience their lives in the absence of their parents, it is important to explore and record the similarities and differences between the

perceptions of the adults and children; existing studies reveal that children are more resilient than adults think (cf. Cebotari et al. 2016). We also need to take account of children's perspectives (their voices and agency) because they are able to elucidate their own expectations, fears and anxieties, perceived benefits and disbenefits of separation (Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2017; Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Jerves et al. 2018; NíLaoire et al. 2010).

The wellbeing of children/teenagers who stay when parents migrate could be related in the following broad terms: the negative outcomes include the social and psychological costs of loneliness and children's sadness (Catrinescu et al. 2011; Jerves et al. 2018; Jingzhong 2011; Nazridod 2014) while the benefits include economic gains, given that the remittances parents send back positively impact on the children's school performance (cf. Asis 2006; Catrinescu et al. 2011; Olwig 1999).[1] However, these issues are complex.

Firstly, in analysing the outcomes of parental migration, we need to consider the influence on teenagers' experiences – such as their school performance – of various characteristics of their transnational lives. Research in post-soviet Moldova shows that children with a migrant father perform better in school while those in a similar situation in Georgia perform less well (Cebotari, Siegel, and Mazzucato 2016). Secondly, we need to take into account the similarities and differences between adults' and children's perceptions of the effects on aspects of their well-being. In Moldova, decreased school performance is related to the absence of remittances, according to *caregivers*; meanwhile better school performance is linked to both parents being abroad, according to the *children* – whether parents are together or divorced (Cebotari, Siegel, and Mazzucato 2016). On the one hand, this indicates that the children's perspectives are pertinent to assessing their school

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[1] We follow Cebotari et. al. in considering school performance to be one of the indicators of children's well-being, along with their health, emotions and attitudes (Cebotari, Siegel, and Mazzucato 2016).

performance, and on the other, it reveals that the children are resilient. Thirdly, the children's perspectives/voices need to be considered because they elucidate their own experiences and understandings, such as notions of home and attachment (NíLaoire et al. 2010). In Vietnam, children perceive their migrant parents "as they saw [see] themselves, as powerless people making great sacrifices in the best interests of the family" (Hoang and Yeoh 2015, 192).

The existing literature on migration and children with absent, migrant parents in Tajikistan suggests there are gender inequalities in both school performance and well-being. Furthermore, emigration is associated positively with the children's well-being and school performance by some authors and negatively by others; this is partly why we emphasize the importance of taking the children's age and gender into account, as well as the particular transnational characteristics of any given case (Cebotari et al. 2016). Nearly all these authors base their analysis on quantitative methodology – more precisely, on national surveys conducted in 2007, 2009 and 2011[2]. A recent study by Cebotari (2018) contradicts previous research by stating that "children, *particularly girls, benefit from migration* […] In and of itself, the migration of household members does not adversely affect children's educational development in Tajikistan" (Cebotari 2018, 585)[3]. Conversely, another recent paper by Jaupart reveals that "the migration of a family member has a *beneficial influence on boys but not girls*. […] girls are more likely to be idle, undertake household chores and marry early" (Jaupart 2018, 28)[4]. By studying the influence of children's age and gender in more detail, research by Gatskova et al. (2017) demonstrates that the emigration of siblings or either parent

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[2] A three-wave household living standard panel survey (LSMS) with data collected by the Tajikistani National Committee for Statistics, theThe World Bank and the Institute for East- and Southeast European Studies based in Germany, in 2007, 2009 and 2011.
[3] Our italics.
[4] Our italics.

contributes to the *improvement* of *young* girls' education outcomes. But the emigration of siblings is particularly *detrimental* to school attendance (Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013), especially among children from less educated households and *teenage girls* (Gatskova, Ivlevs and Dietz 2017). Still, longer-term parental migration is positively associated with children's enrollment in school (Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013).

The literature also demonstrates that it is not transnational life per se that entails lower emotional wellbeing but a combination of factors, such as: the specific context, the social norms of the family, the particular child's upbringing and caregivers (Åkesson, Carling, and Drotbohm 2012; Hoang and Yeoh 2012; Mazzucato and Dito 2018; Parreñas 2005), the length of the parent's absence and quality of transnational communication (Hong and Yeoh 2015), and the children's age and gender (cf. Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2016; Hong and Yeoh 2015). Studies carried out in Tajikistan highlight the importance of taking these variables into account, because these different factors may intersect in different ways to produce heterogeneous outcomes (cf. Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham 2013; Catrinescu et al. 2011; Cebotari 2018; Jaupart 2018; Gatskova et al. 2017; Nazridod 2014).

Our objective in this study is to focus on the voices of children and thereby acknowledge that "*children* living through migratory processes are agents who, while sharing some common realities with other family members, *live their own experiences*." (Duque-Páramo 2012, 472)[5].

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[5] Our italics.

Key theoretical issues and concepts

Researchers studying childhood only recently started to focus on the understanding and perceptions of children themselves (Bak and von Bromssen 2010). The methodology and analytical framework of our study draw their focus from two broader theories: the *sociology of childhood* (Crivello, Camfield, and Woodhead 2009; James and Prout 1997) and child-centred ethnography (Cheney 2008; Corsaro 2004; Qvortrup 2004). Our starting point was a "strengths-based" approach (Saleebey 1996) to analyzing young people as competent social actors, capable of shaping their lives and experiences of parental migration (Asis 2006; Barker and Weller 2003; Olwig 1999; Duque-Páramo 2012). We framed our analysis around coping strategies (Antonovsky 1996) which are deeply connected with resilience (Masten 2001; Saleebey 1996; Wu, Tsang, and Ming 2014); in addition, we examined gender differences in how young people make sense of and respond to their situation (Butler 1990; Harris 2004).

The key feature of the *sociology of childhood* paradigm is to treat childhood as a social construction**.** This not only analyses parents or adults as actors in the socialisation process, but also helps us understand the other ways in which children shape their own social reality and behaviours. Its focus is on accepting children as active social agents who are capable of helping to shape the processes and structures around them and "whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right" (Barker and Weller 2003, 256

A *child-centred ethnography* acknowledges that "for children, childhood […] is the social mode through which they experience the world, and thus [it is] more a practice than a state of being" (Cheney 2008, 30). It is both a theory – a set of organized principles for analyzing a topic; and a methodology – a mode of collecting data. Such an approach moves from determining the negative impacts on children's wellbeing to determining the

positive impacts too – and from a focus on "needs" to a focus on "coping strategies" (Fattore, Mason, and Watson 2007). Indeed, Qvortrup (2004) argues that the absence of children in social analysis, methods and statistics contributes to their conceptual marginality in everyday life. Thus, this article positions children at the centre of research.

For the analysis of *gender* performance, we took up the following suggestion by Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham (2013); "given the gender differentials in school engagement and migration in Tajikistan, it would also be insightful to consider *the impact of household members' migration for girls and boys separately, as well as together*" (2013, 12 our italics). The same procedure was carried out in research in other countries, such as in Ghana (Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2017). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Harris, who analyzed gender relations in Tajik society, defines gender as "a culture-specific ideal, varying over time, that males and females are supposed to live up to in order to become intelligible to, and accepted members of, their own communities" (Harris 2004, 14). Each society has its own ideals of how men and women should act, expressing its expectations accordingly. Indeed, it is primarily in the family that the gender norms of Tajik society are internalized, and this is the space where boys and girls start to learn appropriate gender performances (Harris 2004).

Throughout our study, the teenagers presented evidence of being *resilient*. Simply put, this is the personal characteristic possessed by some individuals of being able to adapt to challenging situations in order to overcome difficulties and stress – a kind of "ordinary magic" (Masten 2001). At the same time, it is part of a dynamic process linked to the social capital of a family and its surrounding community, involving both personal qualities and learned behaviours. For this research, we employed the first element of this notion: resilience as a personal trait of the adolescent interviewed – as an *ability*. Coping strategies concern *how* they overcame challenging situations.

Our focus on *coping strategies* takes inspiration from Antonovsky's concept of "understanding" (Antonovsky 1996). Antonovsky researched the relationship between stress, health and well-being (salutogenesis), trying to understand why some people, regardless of difficult and stressful situations, stay healthy while others do not. Antonovsky proposed the concept of a *Sense of Coherence* (SOC): "a disposition to look at life and its problems in a manner which makes coping easier" (Germano, Misajon, and Cummins 2001, 4). He identified three elements of SOC: (i) *meaningfulness,* which involves both a wish and a motivation to cope; (ii) *comprehensibility*, a belief that the challenge is understood; (iii) *manageability*, a belief that resources to cope are available. The core tenet of this paradigm is the focus on the coping strategies people use to overcome stress and hardship. The concept of "understanding" proved very useful in our research because it allowed us to analyse how the children give coherence to their separation from their parents and become empowered through coping strategies.

Intensive methodologies

Our study deployed the methodology of *micro-ethnography*, combining three main techniques: (1) in-depth interviews, (2) participant observation, and (3) participants' diaries. We used tailored and complementary intensive methodologies to reach deeper meanings attached to the adolescents' experiences.

Micro-ethnography (youth-centred)

Among all qualitative/intensive methods, ethnography, traditionally a method from anthropology, best enables the researcher to view children not as passive recipients of adult socialisation, but rather as social actors who create their own meanings and views about their lives (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Mishna, Antle, and Regehr 2004). Ethnography takes the observation of daily actions and routines as data to construct broad

interpretations and abstract analyses (Eder and Corsaro 1999, 523). For this paper, we used *micro*-ethnography (youth-centred), also known as "focused" or "specific ethnography", because we concentrated on a precise aspect of teenagers' daily routines. Micro-ethnography allows research to draw specifically "on the ways that a cultural ethos is reflected in microcosm in *selected aspects of everyday life*, […] giving emphasis to *particular behaviours in particular settings* rather than attempting to portray a whole cultural system" (Wolcott 1990, 64; our italics).

Positionality of the interviewer both as "insider" and "outsider"

The *positionality of the interviewer* – the first-named author of this article – was also important for accessing the young people's views. She was born in the same city (Khorugh, Tajikistan), spoke the same language, shared the same ethnic background and was knowledgeable about the teenagers' cultural and religious backgrounds. In the language of migration research, she was an "apparent insider" (cf. Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014, 51). Meanwhile, having the *difference* of not having experienced a phase of her youth with absent biological parents and of having lived abroad for more than eight years, gave her an "outsider" view, an "etic" perspective.

This allowed her to see and question young people's experiences from an "outsider perspective" – as "not natural", compared to the way the wider society and the young people themselves see it.

Criteria for research in the field

Data collection was carried out for one month, between February and March 2017, in the city Khorugh, one of Tajikistan's four regional administrative capitals in the south-central region of the country. We used four criteria to select the study sample, as described below.

1. *Age*; the sample was 12-18 years old. In research, adolescence is considered as the period between 11 and 18 years of age, a time when young people define "personal values and goals and [are] establishing autonomy from the family" (Berk 2007, 8). Statistically, people are categorized as children in this age-group, but in terms of psychology and human development they are considered adolescents.

2. *Gender:* four girls and four boys were selected for analysis in order to explore gender differences.

3. *School education:* adolescents who are studying. The research, therefore, captures the experiences of those children who have continued school and cannot be generalised to children who have not.

4. *Length of the parents' current migration episode*; a minimum was set of six months, though in practice the interviewees' parents had been abroad for a minimum of five years – not including past episodes of parental migration. According to Bennett, Clifford, and Falkingham (2013, 12), short and long-term migration have different implications for children who remain behind. Researching youth, whose age enables them to express with sufficient insight and richness of content, and with a "stable" experience of being a teenager with absent migrant parents, was key for our observations.

The first-named author contacted the director and teachers of a school in Khorugh, who proposed three adolescents, who were interviewed with their consent. The other respondents were reached by snowball sampling due to the difficulty in identifying a set of teenagers who met inclusion criteria and felt able to express their feelings and personal experiences with confidence. While snowball sampling is common in qualitative research, and often the most appropriate for giving access to hard-to-reach or hidden populations (Noy 2008), it is not primarily concerned with obtaining a

representative/unbiased sample, as in quantitative research, but with obtaining a diverse sample, as in our case.

The methods used

In-depth interviews were conducted in neutral locations where the adolescents felt comfortable, including empty rooms in a school, one in a cousin's house, and the remainder in Khorugh central park.

Conversations were conducted in *Shughni*, which is spoken in the Pamir mountains of eastern Tajikistan, and interviews were transcribed directly into English. They were nominally semi-structured, with a number of guiding questions; but each interview followed its own particular direction.

Participant observation took place mainly after interviews ended. The adolescents would continue the discussion while the interviewer walked with them through the streets and to the cafés near the school. The teenagers felt more relaxed during these moments, without the recorder and were able to share their feelings and experiences of growing up without the presence of their parents. One girl took the initiative by making phone calls to share thoughts and emotions about the loneliness of living with her caregivers. Some phone calls to the mother of another respondent were also observed, during which the teenager expressed both happiness and later, feelings of distance and sadness.

Field notes from the participant observation contributed to our understanding of subjects' feelings and coping strategies. As the topic itself is sensitive, observation of the adolescents' body language, the way they communicated, and their use of tone was crucial. For instance, in an interview with Shabnam (12, female) the interviewer had to be careful when asking questions related to her parents or her guardians (extended family

with whom she lived), because her happy voice became sad and she would look fragile, revealing precarious her emotional state.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked to write a *diary* for as many days as they wished, over a maximum of two weeks. The purpose of this was to build up an image of how the young people spent their days – of their practices and feelings – and to let them share these with the researcher.

Using diaries as a method of data collection has been given little attention and thus is rarely done by social researchers (Bryman 2015). In a study in China, diaries written by children were used to analyse "how life has changed since [their] parents migrated". "[L]ike a self-portrait of left-behind children", their diaries painted "a real and vivid picture of their daily life" (Huifang in Jingzhong 2011, 629). None of the teenagers in our research had written a diary before, but the process was explained to them and they were advised that they could write whatever they wished.

To ensure *anonymity*, we have changed the names of participants in this paper. The analysis of the diaries, interviews and field notes were carried out using a matrix of thematic content to identify central themes (Bryman 2015) and the broad theme of "coping strategies" emerged from this.

Socio-demographic profile of the adolescents

In Tajik family networks any relative can be involved in decision-making about – and contribute to – the social, psychological development and economic position of the child/adolescent. This means that, depending on the circumstances, any relative can help with the economic wellbeing of children, and a child may be cared for by an extended family network beyond their biological parents.

To contextualise the findings of our research, we summarize participants' socio-demographic characteristics below.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the adolescents

Name	Age	Age when parents migrated	Gender	Family members in migration	Caregivers/siblings
Majnun	14	1.5	male	Both parents	Aunt and her family. Brother and a sister
Ruslan	13	2	male	Both parents, sister and brother	Uncle and cousin
Shabnam	12	7	female	Both parent	Grandmother, uncle and his family, unmarried uncle and her brother
Rahima	14	1	female	Both parents, sister	Grandaunt/uncle and his family. Brother lives with the mother's parents.
Anis	17	8	male	Both parents, sister	Lives with his cousin only
Sabzina	14	8	female	Both parents, brother	Grandmother, sister, unmarried uncle, married uncle and their son, aunt's children (2)
Salim	18	8	male	Both parents	Grandparents, sister
Rohila	17	1	female	Both parents	Uncle and his wife, brother

Gender inequalities among adolescents experiencing parental migration

Tajikistan has powerful gender norms and girls and young women experience more rigid control over their lives than males do (Harris 2004), something also observed in the context of parental migration. The social construction of "masculinity" and "femininity" in the Tajik community can be identified from the interviews and diaries of the children.

The *boys* are influenced by traditional and stereotypical *views on masculinity that limit them in expressing their feelings* and lead them to bottle them up. During the interview,

when Majnun (14 years old, male) was asked questions about "feelings", he seemed not to understand what the word meant. This was particularly the case for those boys to whom the interviewer had to offer examples of happy or sad moments, to help guide them in understanding their emotions. In Tajik society, as in the models of masculinity in other countries more generally, the traditional image of a "real man" involves hiding feelings and emotions, because they are considered signs of weakness. Boys are taught to be strong from an early age, since they will be heads of the family; masculinity is "socially attached to the role of a breadwinner in the family – a man, a husband, a father" (Kasymova 2008, 38).

When both parents are abroad, the traditional gender-role division in Tajikistan renders the experiences of *girls* harder *compared to boys,* particularly in relation to *being exposed to an excessive amount of household chores*. Girls, in general, do not gain much from migration, and gender inequality is higher in migrant households than it is in non-migrant households (Jaupart 2018, 24, 27). The same social practice is observed in China where girls experience their parents' migration differently from boys due to girls being given new housework duties (Jingzhong 2011). In their own words, girls reveal their anger at the new duties and the inequality in relation to their brothers. Rahima (14, female), for example, complains of feeling abused; because her parents are not around, her grandparents are overusing her to do housework: "I am not saying that my mom does not pay attention to me learning the housework, but my grandma makes me do everything. I am very tired every day. And sometimes, if I refuse to do what they say, I will be yelled at".

Shabnam (12, female) said, "I have to clean the house several times a day. Sometimes I get angry and throw everything away and just leave". Because her brother does not have to carry out household chores, Shabnam experiences herself as less important and her

brother as privileged. This is also explained by and reflects the broader gender context of Tajikistan, where women must display traditional characteristics of femininity which include being submissive and obedient to men, being involved in household chores and taking care of children (cf. Harris 2004; Kasymova 2008).

The boys confirm that their aunts or grandparents tell them that household chores are the duties of women; they don't have those same responsibilities. As Majnun (14 years), says: "My aunt is cleaning the house and cooks food for us. She told me that it's a woman's job", while, in contrast, Anis (17, male) emphasized the importance of teaching both sexes household chores and responsibilities, although he ultimately added the caveat "but, girls need it more than boys do".

> My brother and I had almost nothing to do around the house. For
> instance, we would be asked to go to the market and buy bread, but my
> sister was taught to do everything; preparing the bed, making bread,
> cleaning the house, washing the clothes. I am living now with my
> cousin who is also male, and we must do everything ourselves. It would
> have helped me if I was taught all this before. I think boys should learn
> it as well.

Girls reported a lack of someone to talk to or give them emotional support. This presented a challenge to the interviewer; as she was the first person in the adolescents' lives interested in talking about their difficulties, some wanted to continue contact with her as a way of unburdening themselves. Sabzina (14, female) was one example:

> When I first saw you, I thought you were a foreigner, because you don't
> look like a Pamiri girl. When I was told that you are a Pamiri girl, I got
> very interested… I did not expect us to become friends. During the

whole class, I was thinking of you… When you asked me questions, I
wanted to tell you all the truth… In one day, you have become very
close to me… I really want us to be friends.

According to a study by UNICEF, the greatest *negative impacts* for adolescents in Tajikistan, with absent migrant parents, are *depression and sadness, and these are more common in girls than in bo*ys (Catrinescu et al. 2011, 92). Girls aged 15-18 appeared to be the most affected by these psycho-social costs (Catrinescu et al. 2011, 96; Nazridod 2014). Our research confirms this; the girls we interviewed expressed sadness and anger towards caregivers and parents due to the excessive burden of household chores they were expected to undertake. They felt they were seen as laborers rather than family members, compared to their brothers or other boys with absent parents. Shabnam wrote a short letter to her mother that said: "I love you. You told me that you would come for New Year, why didn't you? I love you, your daughter Shabnam". While boys also felt insecurity and sadness, they seemed to cope better with the fact that their parents had to move abroad to provide a better life for them. This seems due mainly to the fact that they continue to perform similar tasks to those they were doing before their parents migrated, such as studying; they are not overwhelmed by new duties.

Both boys and girls showed *similarities* in revealing sadness about their parents appearing to worry only about their school success and not so much about the emotions their children were experiencing. In a study by Duque-Páramo (2012) about parental migration in Colombia, children frequently talked about their duty to get good grades as a way to compensate their parents' sacrifice of migrating for them. This may also suggest that the pressure from parents to achieve good grades in school creates a feeling of 'guilt' in the children. At the same time, both genders also remember their parents' visits with joy and eagerly await the next one. However, visits are scarce due to the difficulty of leaving and

re-entering Russia where laws do not favour family reunification. This creates obstacles for those adolescents who wish to join their parents, forcing them to remain with other family caregivers.

The key *positive impact* for young people who stay with caregivers derives from the remittances sent by their migrant parents, which give them access to more resources. Our research found, however, that the *distribution of remittances also reinforced gender inequalities*. Some girls indicate that boys are more favoured, causing them to feel less valued than their male siblings. As Shabnam (12, female) states, "She [mother] sends money mostly to my brother. But I don't need a lot of money. They love him more than me". Moreover, all boys had mobile phones bought with parents' money while some girls had none.

According to the children, the decision about who receives more remittances is made by the parents and caregivers. These adults also determine the gender disparity in chore duties and research suggests this is higher for girls in a migrant, rather than non-migrant, households (Jaupart 2018, 24). This is contextualized by the cultural norms of gender that are rather conservatively defined and based upon the norms of patrilocal society, whereby girls leave home when they marry and move into the husband's parent's household. (Jaupart 2018, 1).

The literature we reviewed acknowledges that, in Tajikistan, remittances are the main benefit for children/young people separated from their parents, just as they are in other countries. In Tajikistan remittances have contributed to reduced child labor, to better health and nutrition, to keeping children in school longer and to decreasing the gender gap in education (Catrinescu et al. 2011). However, our research reveals that when remittances are sent, some girls – who, unlike boys, already have to carry out numerous

household chores – tend to receive less financial support than boys. One of our main findings is that children accept this situation because they perceive it as 'normal' in Tajikistan.

This does not mean that all alternative caregivers are unsympathetic or autocratic. Nor does it mean that all children are submissive or have fully accepted their situation. Rather, they show agency and develop resilience and coping strategies. This is related to Harris' (2004) findings concerning power relations inside the family, "though in Tajikistan young people are subordinate to their family and parents and collectivism is expressed through hierarchical power relations, nevertheless children are exposed to many influences outside of the family and may well look for spaces that allow them to develop their own personalities" (Harris 2004, 77). Therefore, the children we interviewed "psychologically moved beyond conformity to the collective" in which they are being brought up (Harris 2004, 77), and some dream of studying abroad and exploring the world.

Resilience and gendered coping strategies

The teenagers revealed themselves to be both resilient and able to use coping strategies in their daily life in order to deal with the psycho-social costs of separation from migrant parents. Moreover, their coping mechanisms revealed gender differences in strategy.

Both the boys and girls said that they felt very sad because they missed parents who had been abroad for so many years. Simultaneously, they also demonstrated *resilience* (Masten 2001) in overcoming their challenging situation, especially by keeping in mind their goals for a better life for themselves. In the words of Rohila (17, female), whose parents left for Russia when she was one year old:

Usually, I like to keep my thoughts and feelings inside me. My neighbor who is also my friend is the person with whom I share my feelings sometimes. But I like to keep them to myself and listening to music always helps me to calm down. […] When my mother came for a visit, I was happy and it was an unusual feeling. I was not worried about anything. […] It [her parents' migration] is hard, but I was able to sign up for extra courses like English language and Mathematics. They are important to know for the future.

Rahima (14, female) recorded in her diary the "grief" she feels:

Grief for me is a hard and painful feeling, caused by hiding my anger inside, against the background of low self-esteem. It puts you in the position of either blaming the circumstances or yourself. I don't want to feel this because it pushes me towards unfairness and suicide. Every person has feelings towards all that surrounds her, especially to herself and to those who were always close.

Despite her considerable personal difficulties, her sometimes abusive situation and her seemingly depressed state, Rahima juxtaposed this with her dream of travelling around the world, which keeps her motivated to adapt to her circumstances and achieve good grades in school:

My mom has been away for a very long time now. I was only in my 2nd grade when I last saw her. My dad was here last year and left in October [2016]. I think I see them (caregivers) as my family, not my real mom and dad. […] But I also don't like my family (caregivers)

much. They yell at you or start fights, for no reason. They call me

"cow" and I don't know what else… […] Like they are so lazy, they

don't even get up to fetch water for themselves; no, they ask me to do

it. When my dad was around, they were much nicer to me, but as soon

as he left, everything was the same again. […] I would like to leave

Pamir. I want to go to Paris. To Beijing also. I want to go to study

there. I would like to learn English, then go abroad and study, and

then work.

Education and *studies* were frequently mentioned in the interviews with the adolescents and in their diaries. They want to obtain a better education and to take a different path from their parents; this leads them to adapt to their challenging context. For parents who did not achieve the educational level they aspired to, good education attainment has become a very meaningful goal in Tajikistan. The adolescents also mentioned that their parents always ask them to study harder than themselves and not end up working in low skilled jobs.

From the perspective of Antonovsky's concept of "sense of coherence" (1996), the teenagers revealed (i) "meaningfulness", in which their "understanding" of the situation invested them with "coping strategies"; (ii) "comprehensibility", wherein they accept the circumstances by placing the focus on themselves, stating that their parents left to provide a better life and opportunities for them; (iii) "manageability", in which the remittances sent by the parents allow them to study, seeing it as a means to have a better job than their parents.

As Majnun (14, male) said, *"They want a better life for us"*. Similarly, Anis describes how his parents faced many financial constraints when they were based in Tajikistan but

as soon as they left, they started to send money that helped him and his siblings to obtain the basic necessities of daily life. It was evident that the children's understanding of why they have been left behind with their relatives is that their parents want to support them financially and provide a better future together. Sabzina (17, female) explained, *"She [mother] is doing this because of me, so I can have a brighter future. She told me that she will go and save some more money so I can apply to a university afterwards."* Respondents' sense of coherence can also be attributed to the fact that migration has become a normal part of family life in Tajikistan. To a certain and perhaps increasing extent, growing up without the presence of parents has become normalized. As Antonovky (1996) says, this understanding – this sense of coherence, reinforced by normalization – determines how young people respond to their experience, the way they cope with their parents' absence and the challenges surrounding it.

The *coping strategies* used to deal with the social and emotional costs of parental migration present some similarities but mostly demonstrate *differences between the boys and girls*. The boys spend their time on social networks/social media, such as Odnoklassnini (a Russian social network platform), hanging out with other boys or playing sport. In the interviews, the boys tended to hide their emotions and revealed that they found it difficult to express them. In the words of Salim (18, male),

> I have become like iron, no feelings. Sometimes I wonder why I am lost. I think a lot and the anger and sadness that I have in me, I never show it to anyone. It makes me feel depressed. When I was younger, the support that I needed from my father, he could not give it to me, since he wasn't present.

The reluctance to show emotions also reflects the understanding of masculinity in Tajik society. Meanwhile, the girls revealed, in the interviews and diaries, that they use crying as a relief mechanism to feel better, "I will cry a lot. Crying is my remedy. I cannot open up to anyone. I let go of pain with my tears [sad laughter]. The more I cry the better and more relieved I feel" said Sabzina (17, female). The girls also stay longer in school during the day to avoid household chores; they go to a youth centre or to American Corner (a space/centre)[6]; chat with neighbours/friends after evening prayers; and get involved in volunteering.

Both boys and girls report speaking regularly with their parents through various online internet platforms, such as Viber, which provides a virtual connection and engages them emotionally. This "transnational parenthood" sustains communication between parents and children, albeit at a distance (cf. Carling, Menjvar, and Schmalzbauer 2012). The desire to communicate across distance was observed among all the adolescents we interviewed. To some degree, Internet-based communication reduces the feeling of distance between children and their parents. The regularity of phone calls varies; usually the parents call once or twice a week. Still, the caregivers of younger children are often present when their parents call, which makes it difficult for the children to talk openly about the sadness they feel.

Conclusion

Our research reached four key conclusions. Firstly, the adolescents experience difficulties but simultaneously give coherence to the situation and invest in *coping strategies* to overcome their challenging circumstances. Cheap communication technologies and the

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[6] A space/centre organised by the American government, which highlights American culture, events, and programmes, among other things.

Internet have contributed to these strategies. Secondly, they are *resilient* and demonstrate personal characteristics which help them overcome depression and sadness. Thirdly, these experiences and coping strategies reveal *gender inequalities*: boys spend their leisure time on social media networks and hang out or play sport with other boys; meanwhile girls feel overwhelmed by the household chores assigned to them by caregivers, as a result of which they stay longer in school, go to youth centres and evening prayers. Fourthly, these young people *naturalised* having to live with sadness – in a process that mirrors the "normalization" of these social costs in society at large – because this is not questioned among family members or in wider society.

This is the first empirical analysis of how adolescents perceive parental migration in Tajikistan. The use of qualitative methodology – specifically a youth-centred micro-ethnography based on interviews, participant observation and diaries – enabled us to access their personal perspectives and agency. Because we focused on a very particular group – i.e. teenagers in the specific region of Khorugh with both parents abroad and drew on a small sample – our findings cannot be generalized to all adolescents within Tajikistan or to the region as a whole. Rather, they reveal issues that need to be further researched and addressed on a larger scale. Despite its limitations, the study reveals how boys and girls experience migration in an unequal fashion, even though both develop agency to counter sadness and depression by reacting with resilience and generating coping strategies. It is their "understanding", as formulated by Antonovsky (1996), that gives coherence to their situation by interpreting it as resulting from their parents wanting a "better life" for them. This resonates with similar observations by Hoang and Yeoh (2015) in Vietnam, Åkesson (2012) in Cape Verde and Boccagni (2012) in Ecuador.

Our results also generally agree with previous research. As Cebotari (2018) points out positive findings of adolescents' coping strategies and resilience do not negate their

vulnerability. Nevertheless, advances in communication technologies have helped make their lives easier (Cebotari 2018). However, our research revealed that some girls do not own mobile phones to enable them to communicate with their parents. This contrasts with the experience of their brothers, who were given mobiles paid for using the remittances sent by their parents, demonstrating prevailing gender inequalities. Our research also confirmed two heterogeneous observations about the respective experiences of girls and boys in Tajikistan. On the one hand, for girls and boys alike, the migration of both parents contributed to their educational development; thus, as Cebotari (2018, 585) states, *boys and girls benefit from migration*. On the other hand, girls took on many more household duties, boys did not– and in that sense, as Jaupart argues (2018, 28) parental migration had a *beneficial influence on the boys, but not on the girls*.

Our novel finding is that girls' feelings of sadness and depression are worsened by their maltreatment by caregivers – in particular, the psychological abuse directed towards them for not having carried out household duties as required. They seem to feel lonelier compared to boys because, rather than their wellbeing being enhanced by the caregivers, they are subjected to emotional and verbal abuse. This novel contribution resulted from the chosen methodology and our decision to interview only adolescents, recommended by Waksler (1996), informing them that no adults would participate. Knowing that their caregivers would not be interviewed paved the way for these adolescents to freely express their discomfort about living with their caregivers, without fearing their criticism.

Despite Tajikistan being one of the countries most dependent on remittances from migration, transnational households and related social policies remain understudied. Following good practices of countries such as Moldova (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011), the government might, in the future, consider (i) monitoring, by registering all children whose parents have migrated, and (ii) having intervention with support, e.g. by opening a hotline

with national coverage that children can call anonymously in order to receive advice and counselling on psychological issues. More research is therefore needed to shed light on the many aspects of this important topic, including care arrangements for children/teenagers.

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