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Parents who migrate without their children: Gendered and psychosocial reconfigurations of parenting in transnational families

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Abstract

What psychosocial impacts does migrating without children have on parents? How do the reconfigurations of gendered dynamics in transnational families (TFs) affect the well-being and subjectivities of mothers and fathers in the hosting and sending communities? Through this literature meta-synthesis, we describe six main areas of concern for parents who migrate without their children: (a) migration and family roles; (b) affects; (c) negotiations of gender, subjectivity, and family expectations; (d) family cohesion, tensions, and arrangements; (e) communication and the digital relational space; and (f) narratives on family reunification. We discuss the ways in which these areas and processes interact with each other within and around TFs. This article contributes to theories on family transnationality and transnational parenting by identifying and discussing specific dynamics of change and possibilities of becoming, which will be helpful to professionals working with TFs and to migrant parents to understand and anticipate likely family challenges.

KEYWORDS

family care, gender, meta-synthesis, migration, transnational families, transnational parenting

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of migration studies, transnational families (TFs) represent a unique opportunity to understand migration as an ongoing process that connects people, spaces, and cultures.

A defining feature of TFs is that they maintain meaningful ties across geographical settings (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) and tend to act as bridges between home and host societies, influencing and transforming both.

With over 281 million international migrants, human mobility continues to be one of the most pressing global concerns. Parallel to the continued increase of migrants' rates in relation to the total world population (2.3% in 1970, 2.9% in 1990, and 3.6% in 2020) (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024), worldwide migration policies have become more restrictive to control permanent settlement and freedom of movements (Lutz, 2023). As both phenomena are linked to higher rates of irregular(ized) entries (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016) and family separations (Roy & Yumiseva, 2021), family transnationality is becoming more frequent. In addition, considering that most of the caretakers in charge of dependent family members in the home country are women (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022), FTs and the family reconfigurations that tend to occur in transnationality are a highly gendered phenomenon.

When one or both parents migrate without their children, this decision entails a major family restructuring, as the children who stay behind usually fall under the care of relatives or community members. Although the migration of one or both parents may increase the socioeconomic status of the family in the home country, this separation is often a source of vulnerability and anxiety for the migrant parents because the uncertainty of migration contributes to the responsibility of providing for the family and educating their children at a distance (Haagsman, 2018; Kilkey & Merla, 2014).

Whereas the literature on the psychosocial impact of parental departure on children is copious, the repercussions on the parents themselves have been analyzed to a much lesser extent. The literature on family and migration points out the need to adopt a transdisciplinary approach in which psychological and social processes entangle to create an inseparable assemblage. In this paper, we provide a reading of the parents' experiences of family transnationality in which, in line with the field of psychosocial studies (Frosh et al., 2024), the social and the personal are both in evidence (American Psychological Association, 2017). With this metasynthesis of the literature, in which dynamics and negotiations of gender provide a major analytical framework, we integrate and interpret the psychosocial ramifications that leaving one or more children in the home country may have for the emigrant mother, father, or both, and, in general, for the TF. The results of this interpretative work will help to identify or anticipate areas of concern for TFs, professionals working with them, and policy makers. The results may also be useful to families who are planning to become transnational as well as to returned family members to make sense of their past experience and its current ramifications.

METHOD

Database search

We purposefully included several databases not usually considered in systematic reviews, most of which tend to be based on Web of Science, PubMed, and Scopus. We are critically aware of these databases' stringent criteria of inclusion (Chavarro et al., 2018) and tendency to foster epistemological, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity (Marginson, 2022; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Vera-Baceta et al., 2019). Our choice of databases also reflects the intent to bridge across disciplines, languages, and geographies, as we included discipline-specific (PsycInfo, ERIC, Medline, Sociology Source Ultimate) as well as multidisciplinary (Academic Search Ultimate, BASE, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science) databases. We also included databases that are more open to non-English languages, such as Dialnet Plus and RACO. Table 1 summarizes the linear method we followed to identify and select the 43 articles that were eventually included in the review. Our search closing date was February 16, 2024.

TABLE 1 Database search strategy and inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Search field	Search criteria	Hits
Keyword (KW) search criteria (each search line is linked by AND)	Title Keywords: parent* or caretaker* or caregiver* or famil* or mother* or father*	4072
	KW: transnational*	
	KW: left or leaving behind or migrant	
	KW: child* or adolescent* or youth or son* or daughter* or kid* or teenager*	
Disciplines	Communication, Education, Psychology, Sociology, Social Work, Politics & Government, Political Sciences	1683
Year range	2003–2024	1658
Limit to	Scientific publications, Critiques/Book reviews, Magazines, Reports	1414
Databases	Web of Science, Sociology Source Ultimate, Academic Search Ultimate, APA PsycInfo, BASE, ERIC, Scopus, MEDLINE, Dialnet Plus, JSTOR Journals, RACO (Catalan open-access journals)	617
Language	English, Spanish, Italian, Catalan, unknown	598
Exclusion of repeated results		374
Initial screening of results to ensure appropriateness to the research question	Exclusion criteria: Articles that did not fit with the research question on the psychosocial consequences of parental emigration on the parents themselves. The excluded articles focused exclusively on issues of: 1. Caretakers in the home country 2. Reviews of the literature 3. Roma families 4. Adoption 5. Children and adolescents 6. School performances and teacher's perceptions 7. Language education 8. Internal (instead of transnational) migration 9. Legislation and legal standards about migration or family reunification 10. Second- and third-generation migrant children 11. Eldercare 12. Parents returning to their home country whereas their children stay in country of emigration or resettlement 13. Mothers and fathers whose children are with them in the host society (no separation from children)	
Final result		43

Meta-synthesis and thematic analysis

Meta-syntheses aggregate the literature in "a form of meta-study, that is, a study of the processes and results of previous studies in a target domain that moves beyond those studies to situate historically, define for the present, and chart future directions," and thus "create larger interpretive renderings" (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, pp. 784–785). Epistemologically close to critical realism and interpretivism, the main objective of a meta-synthesis is to contribute to the development of observations, interpretations, theories, and methods that may further the field about the phenomenon under investigation.

Although a meta-synthesis may start from a systematic review (Page et al., 2021), it does not share with the latter the goal of reaching an unbiased consensus or uniform accounts that

summarize the knowledge about a phenomenon (Thorne, 2019). Rather, meta-syntheses aim at countering "the reductionism of biomedicine by uncovering the complexity of human health phenomena, shedding light on the subjective experiential aspects of various illness conditions and circumstances" (Thorne, 2019, p. 4). For this reason, meta-syntheses highlight and interpret differences and do not shy away from engaging with complexities and contradictions in the literature. Because meta-syntheses are fundamentally an interpretative process, they can include quantitative publications in addition to the more usual qualitative meta-synthesis.

To identify main areas and themes of psychosocial concern for TFs, we performed a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Each article was read independently by two researchers within the research team, that is, the authors (who, respectively, belong to the disciplines of communication, psychology, and sociology), and a research assistant in the field of international relations. In weekly team meetings, we openly discussed the selected articles' concerns and their relevance for TFs' dynamics and affective changes related to parental migration. As we progressively talked about the articles, we identified overarching patterns, themes, and subthemes.

We interpreted themes and patterns according to our own disciplines, professional and academic knowledge of the field of migration studies and family, and personal sensibilities linked to our own migrations. This reflexive process entailed considering our personal and social expectations, values, and constructions as informative of the data selection and analysis. In other words, even if our inquiry focused on TFs, it also reflected our personal experiences and our professional positions and interests (Gemignani et al., 2024), which we shared and analyzed both reflexively and critically. The critical aspect of the analysis referred to, first, the ongoing problematization of our assumptions and truths and, second, considering different disciplinary or theoretical frameworks which provided viable alternatives to the dominant interpretations of an issue or phenomenon.

For instance, based on our knowledge of the field of family transnationality, we were expecting distance parenting to be inherently problematic and less desirable than in-presence parenting. When articles reported on the use of technology to create a shared digital space among TFs' members, we actively looked for problematizations. We assumed that digital space was a palliative for the impossibilities of a real space and relationships. By looking critically at our assumptions about the reality and primacy of touch (Ratcliffe, 2018), we realized, on the one hand, the implicit risk of looking at the data to confirm our expectations and, on the other hand, how deeply ingrained is physicality in our phenomenology of life and relationship. Critically questioning our own normative expectations and values about family and presence allowed us to realize how dominant constructions limited our openness toward innovative configurations and meanings of TFs.

In our analysis, we paid particular attention to the deductive-inductive continuum in order to link the interpretations of specific and local issues or processes to broader theoretical frameworks of relevance to TFs, such as gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Montes, 2013), affect theories (Gemignani & Hernández-Albujar, 2022; Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015), and theories on migrant parenting (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Hershberg & Lykes, 2019; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). In other words, the themes and their relations with subthemes and larger areas or categories were interpreted and analyzed according to both the context of each article's specific contribution (i.e., the relevance of findings and observations for the specific study) and the broader research context (i.e., how these findings and observations related to the discipline and to other articles to identify and interpret a specific phenomenon or area of concern). Given the multidisciplinarity of the research team's members, this process of thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023) allowed to critically explore each theme's implications for the well-being of TFs and for the labor of professionals working with them, according to our disciplinary sensibility, academic expertise, and professional experience (Gemignani et al., 2024).

Validity criteria

The wide range of diversity and heterogeneity of participants, methodologies, and linguistic, geographical, and cultural contexts (Table 2) in the selected articles is an indicator of quality in systematic reviews (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) as well as in qualitative and mixed-method studies (Levitt et al., 2016). The inclusion of qualitative (32), quantitative (4), theoretical (2), and mixed-method (5) studies demonstrates the epistemological and methodological plurality of our search.

RESULTS

Of the 43 selected articles, 20 concerned both parents, 17 were about mothers, and 7 about fathers (Figure 1). Despite greater attention paid to transnational parents in general, 17 of the 24 articles that were specific to one of the genders were concerned with mothers and just 7 with fathers. Gender, in other words, seems to be present as a heuristic to talk about the mothers' role in the TF. We wonder if this trend may reproduce a gender bias in research both by attributing traditional female responsibilities to mothers and by expecting greater emotional consequences for mothers rather than for fathers. In other words, the existing research focus on emigrant mothers might reproduce stereotypical expectations about gendered roles in TFs (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In this review, we focus on those families that have become transnational because of the migration of mothers, fathers, or both parents, who left their country of origin or residence without some or all of their children. An initial observation is that this event affects both those who depart and those who stay in their home country (Kilkey & Merla, 2014). Furthermore, in line with our psychosocial framework (American Psychological Association, 2017; Frosh et al., 2024), the experiences and outcomes of family transnationality need to be understood against a background of affective relations and narratives, which are simultaneously personal, familiar, relational, and cultural (Gemignani & Hernández-Albujar, 2022; Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015).

We organized our analysis of results along six main thematic areas regarding transnational parents:

1. Parents' constructions of their migration and role.
2. Affective consequences for migrant parents.
3. Gender, subjectivity, and family expectations: Constructions and negotiations.
4. Home family and communities: Cohesion, tensions, and arrangements.
5. Communication and the creation of a digital relational space.
6. Imagining family reunification: Narratives on the Future and The Future as Narrative.

These themes act as moving and interwoven lines, rather than static areas of knowledge and practice. In addition to their interrelations, these lines are enfolded within (a) more or less formal and explicit family agreements; (b) shifting cultural and social contexts of family transnationality; (c) dominant discourses and policies on migration; and (d) constructions and negotiations of gendered positions and dynamics both inside and outside the family. Together with the six themes or lines, these four shifting contexts compose the main results of our metasynthesis. The four overarching processes frame the experiences and becomings of each TF, providing the relational and sociocultural grounds through which the six themes affect dynamics and parenting in TFs.

Journal of Family Theory & Review

TABLE 2 List of the 43 articles included in the review.

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
Acedera & Yeoh, 2022	The Philippines	English	Longitudinal and mixed method	Qualitative in-depth interviews and large-scale surveys	EP, CT, and children	56	Left-behind young adult children and their caretakers; intimacy and communication with EP
Adebayo, 2020	Nigerian migrants in China	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Interviews	EF, MH	21	Migrants considering returning to the home country or staying in the resettlement country
Afulani et al., 2016	Sub-Saharan migrants in France	English	Mixed	Questionnaire: The Trajectories and Origins (TEO)	EP	1980	Family separation
Ambrosini, 2015	Various nationalities of migrants in Italy	English	Mixed	Survey based on a structured questionnaire; in-depth interviews (w. 25 participants)	EP	422: 165 males and 257 females	Distance parenting and partial family reunification
Barglowski, 2021	Polish migrants in Germany	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	In-depth interviews	EM	20	Mothers with different class backgrounds who raise their children in the resettlement country
Best, 2014	African Caribbean migrants in New York, US	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Interviews	EM	20	Culture in kinship care and transnational parenting
Boccagni, 2012	Ecuadorian migrants in Italy	English	Qualitative: empirical case study, ethnography	Interviews, observation	EM, CT	200	Mothering at a distance; family ties with the home country

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
Bonizzoni, 2012	Migrants from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Rep., Ecuador, Perú, Philippines, Moldovia, Rumania, Ukraine in Italy	Italian	Qualitative (unspecified)	Interviews	EM and children who reunited with their mothers after having been separated	64 (39 EM; 25 children) in 34 families	Transnational mothering and family arrangements
Bonizzoni, 2015	Latin American, Eastern European, and Philippians migrants in Italy	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	Individual interviews	EM and children who joined their mothers after having been separated	40 EM; 25 children	Relationships between mothers who later reunited with their children in the country of resettlement
Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022	Latin American migrants in Boston, US	English	Qualitative: ethnography	In-depth interviews	EM	63	Relationships of motherhood and daughterhood between migrant mothers
Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010	Peruvian migrant in Chile	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	In-depth interviews and group discussion. Projective techniques (drawings, letter, or poetry)	EM, migrant women	21: 7 women and 14 mothers	Transnational motherhood
Dito et al., 2017	Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands	English	Quantitative	Stratified sampling strategy; cross-sectional data; General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)	EP	24 transnational families	Effects of transnational parenting in health
Dreby, 2006	Mexican migrants in New Jersey, US	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Interviews	EP	43	Family separation
Fuller-Iglesias, 2015	Mexican migrants to the US	English	Qualitative: phenomenology and community-based research	Focus groups	EP, CT, FH, MH, returned migrants	51	Interpersonal dynamics during and after migration

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
Gao & Sacchetto, 2023	Chinese migrant families in Italy	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	In-depth interviews, participant observation, and multi-sited ethnographic observation	EP and their children	50	Exploration of mobility-childcare negotiation processes in transnational families
Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017	Colombian migrants in Spain, US, and Chile	Spanish	Qualitative: hermeneutic phenomenological research	Semi-structured interview and survey on socioeconomic status	EP; family members in Colombia	16 families	Causes of change in family systems when a migratory project is faced
Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014	Angola, Nigeria migrants in the Netherlands	English	Quantitative	Survey	EP	131 from Nigerian and 134 from Angola	Parent–child relationships in transnational families
Haagsman, 2018	Angolan migrants in the Netherlands	English	Quantitative; comparative	Survey	EP	139 transnational and 167 non-transnational parents.	Comparison of transnational and non-transnational families
Hernández Cordero, 2016	Guatemalan migrants in Madrid (Spain) and female caretakers in Guatemala	Spanish	Qualitative: multi-sited ethnography	In-depth interviews and life stories	EM, female CT	35 EM, 5 families in home country (CT and children)	Experiences of emigrated mothers and female caretakers that stay in the home country
Hershberg & Lykes, 2019	Indigenous Guatemalan migrants in the US	English	Qualitative: thematic analysis	Individual interviews	EF, CT	9	Fathering in transnational and mixed-status families
Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012	Ukrainian and Ecuadorian migrants in Spain	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Observation and interviews	EP; emigrated family members	26	Parenthood in transnational families

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
López Montaño, 2011	Colombia	Spanish	Qualitative (unspecified)	Semi-structured interviews	EP, MH, FH, CT, children	504	Transnational families and the creation of their family project
Madianou & Miller, 2011	UK and the Philippines	English	Qualitative; comparative ethnography	Comparative ethnography study	EM and their left-behind teenagers	52	Mother–child relationship in transnational families and the role of mobile phone
McCallum, 2019	Jamaican migrants in New York City, US.	English	Mixed	In-depth semi-structured interviews and survey	EM, MH	12 EM and 40 MH	Transnational motherhood
Mcguire & Martin, 2007	US and Oaxaca, Mexico	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Semi-structured interviews and participant observation	EM	31	Experiences of migrant families
Micolta León & García Vásquez, 2011	Migrants from Cali, Colombia in Spain and the US	Spanish	Qualitative: symbolic interactionism and narrative inquiry	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups	EP	Interviews: 10 EM, 10 EF. Focus groups: 6 children of emigrated parents; 16 children of no-emigrated parents	Authority in the case of children with migrant parents
Molina, 2015	Honduran migrants in Washington, DC	English	Theoretical	n/a	EM	n/a	Mothering, structural barriers to family practices
Montes, 2013	Guatemalan migrants in Guatemala and California	English	Qualitative: multi-sited ethnography	Observations, interviews	EF and male family members of EF	43	The construction of masculinity in relation to migration
Parella Rubio, 2007	Peruvian and Ecuadorian migrants in Spain	Spanish	Qualitative (unspecified)	In-depth interviews	EP, CT, family members in the home country	30 migrants and 20 relatives in the country of origin	Care and affective relationships within transnational families

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
Parella Rubio, 2012	Bolivian migrants in Spain transnational families	Spanish	Qualitative (unspecified)	In-depth interviews	EP, FH, MH, left-behind children	20	Gender differences and sexual division of work
Parke & Cookston, 2021	Transnational fathers	English	Theoretical	n/a	EF	n/a	Theory work about transnational fathering
Peng & Wong, 2016	Filipina migrants in Hong Kong	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews	EM, FH, CT	51 EM; 104 FH and CT	Care in transnational families
Phoenix, 2011	Caribbean migrants in Europe	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	Interviews	EM	2 EM	Transnational motherhood
Poeze, 2019	Ghanian migrants in the Netherlands	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Multiple in-depth interviews, visits to social gatherings, observations, and regular telephone calls	EF	24 EF	Transnational fathering
Redmond & Martin, 2023	Migrant families trying to reunite in Canada	English	Mixed	Qualitative interview and survey data	EP, separated families, and professionals who assist these families	169 families attempting to reunite and 100 professionals	Experiences of migrant families trying to reunite
Serra Mingot, 2020	Sudanese families in the Netherlands, the UK, and Sudan	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Biographic interviews, informal conversations, and observations	EM and CT	62: 21 in the Netherlands, 22 in the UK, and 19 of the migrants' matched family members in Sudan	Transnational care-receiving
Sternberg & Barry, 2011	Latino migrants in the US	English	Qualitative: phenomenological hermeneutics	Semi-structured interviews	EM	8 EM	Transnational motherhood
Telve, 2019	Estonian migrants in Finland	English	Qualitative: ethnography	Ethnographic research, in-depth interviews and emic observation	EF and families in home country	23	Family relations in transnational relationships

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors, year	Geographies of transnationality	Language	Research methodology	Form of data collection	Population of concern	Number of participants	Article's domains or concerns
Tungohan, 2013	Filipino migrants in Canada	English	Qualitative (unspecified)	Individual semi-structured interviews	EM involved with civil society organizations	15	Transnational motherhood and activism
Veale & Andres, 2020	Nigerian migrants in Ireland	English	Qualitative: multi-sited, multitemporal ethnographic fieldwork	Semi-structured interviews	EP and Nigerian transnational children	8 families with one parent as asylum seeker in Ireland and the other parent and the CT in Nigeria	The role of imagination in the lives of transnational children and their EP
Villamizar Puyana & Moreno Rojas, 2011	Colombia	Spanish	Qualitative: systematic, intra- and inter-textual analysis	In-depth interviews	EP, left-behind children, and CT	56 family participants; 46% CT, 45% children that stayed at home, 9% EF/EM	Affects between members of transnational families
White et al., 2019	Nigerian migrants in Ireland and the Netherlands	English	Quantitative	Emotional well-being questionnaire, based on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12); self-assessment of health, life satisfaction and emotional well-being (GHQ score)	EP	609 EP (309 in Ireland and 300 in the Netherlands)	Effects of transnational fathering in health
Yeoh et al., 2023	Indonesia and the Philippines	English	Qualitative: coding	Semi-structured interviews	EP, CT, and children	76 left-behind parental or non-parental CT; 32 children; 10 EP; 83 pairs of caretakers and children	Links between the time construct in migration and the temporal structure of family

Note: "Geographies of transnationality" refers to the migrant populations and the resettlement country in which the research was conducted. If only the country's name appears, it is the site where the research was conducted and no specific information about the migrant's nationality or ethnic background is provided. "Research methodology" were divided in four main categories: qualitative (with specification of type), quantitative, mixed, and theoretical.

Abbreviations: CT, non-parental caretakers in the home country; EF, emigrant fathers; EM, emigrant mothers; EP, emigrant parents; FH, fathers in the home country; MH, mothers in the home country.

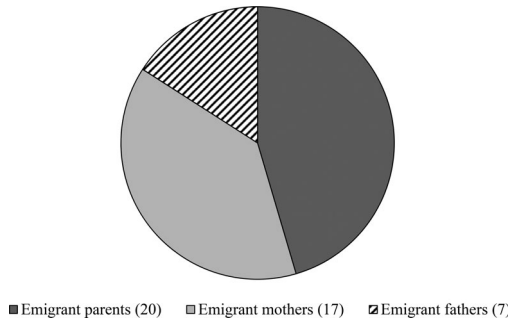

FIGURE 1 Articles according to the family role they are concerned with. This chart represents the distribution of the 43 reviewed articles according to the family role they focus on.

Parents' constructions of their migration and role

Migration as sacrifice

In the reviewed literature, migrant parents commonly constructed their migration as a sacrifice for the well-being of a larger or more significant group, usually their family members. As for any sacrifice, its effort and cost are proportional to the desired expectations, whose hope justifies the affective and material challenges that the sacrifice entails (Halbertal, 2012). Seeing the hardship of migration and family separation as part of the endeavor to "provide her children with a life better than her own" (Sternberg & Barry, 2011, p. 67) situates becoming a transnational mother or father as an "almost heroic" exercise of responsible motherhood (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010, p. 211). Individually and socially, this sacrificial and altruistic narrative helps accepting the "widespread anguish as well as heroic sacrifices" of transnational parents (Liu & Erwin, 2015, p. 244), and seeing their pains and struggles as necessary to achieve a greater good for children, families, and communities (Boccagni, 2012; Dito et al., 2017).

An implicit risk of this sacrifice narrative is that it may discourage self-care (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022) and may justify or normalize the adoption of roles, tasks, and positions that may undermine the migrants' health (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010) and human rights (Redmond & Martin, 2023). In addition, this narrative may downplay the role of structural barriers imposed by migration policies, discrimination, and abuse (Apatinga et al., 2022; Veale & Andres, 2020), which could be constructed as inherent consequences of migration. These barriers end up enfeebling the possibilities of parenting and caring from afar, for instance if overseas parents are exploited with longer work shifts (Afulani et al., 2016; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Veale & Andres, 2020). Shifting circumstances in the country of origin may also affect the parents' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities toward their children and other family members (Boccagni, 2012; Haagsman, 2018; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Serra Mingot, 2020).

The family roles and positionings of transnational parents

Although transnational parents typically justify their departure because of the need to support their family of origin, their access to the labor market strongly depends on their socioeconomic and migratory statuses (Barglowski, 2021; Dito et al., 2017). The impact of poverty and irregularized status on migrants' mental and physical health in host societies is exacerbated when migrants cannot provide as much as they wish to their family of origin or when they

cannot return home (Afulani et al., 2016). Conversely, when migrants can fulfill their provider role or can return temporarily, they may experience "a sense of belonging within a broader family or ethnonational community" and "a subjective sense of upward socioeconomic mobility [which] may, in turn, be associated with improved health outcomes" (Afulani et al., 2016, p. 65).

These connections between status and health underscore the importance of the social and legal regulations of migration in the host society, creating a bridge between migrants' human rights and their healthcare. For instance, for Nigerian parents living in Ireland, their migration status (being documented or not) was "more important than separation in terms of the impact of these factors on migrant parents' emotional wellbeing and health" (White et al., 2019, p. 20).

Transnational parents are typically charged with being ultimately responsible for their children's well-being (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010; Parella Rubio, 2012; Salazar Parreñas, 2005a). This role is both profoundly gendered and tends to reproduce the close link between cultural norms about mothering and the emotional dimensions of adopting or transgressing these normative expectations. On the one hand, transnational mothers understand leaving their children in their home country as a way of sparing them from the dangers of the migration journey and the uncertainties of settlement while focusing on improving family welfare and future opportunities. On the other hand, cultural ideals of motherhood set up traditional expectations about nurturing and educating offspring (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022; Micolta León & García Vásquez, 2011). As such, "this unbalanced and yet crucial relation between responsibilities and practices of care often translates into feelings of pain, anxiety, economic pressures, and inadequacy especially toward dependent family members" (Parella Rubio, 2007, p. 172).

Affective consequences for migrant parents

The emotions that parents feel when leaving their children reflect personal, social, and cultural processes and norms (American Psychological Association, 2017; Bhatia & Ram, 2009). For instance, in those families and societies in which transnational parenting is relatively normalized, such as Ghana (Dito et al., 2017), the parents' feelings of guilt and inadequacy tend to be milder (Boccagni, 2012). Still, overseas parents often experience sadness, loss, and longing, as well as "emotional difficulties and social pressures" of having transgressed the cultural norms of childrearing practices (Molina, 2015, p. 67).

Ideals of good mothering are sources of emotional uncertainty and tensions (Ambrosini, 2015; Molina, 2015) between, on the one hand, the necessity, desire, and pride of providing for their family and, on the other hand, their experiences of estrangement, agony, distress, loneliness, abandonment, loss, and guilt for having left their children (Boccagni, 2012; Bonizzoni, 2012, 2015; Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010; Dreby, 2006; Gao & Sacchetto, 2023; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Horton, 2009; McCallum, 2019; Phoenix, 2011; Pineros-Leano et al., 2021; Salazar Parreñas, 2008; Sternberg & Barry, 2011). The words of a participant in Tungohan's study (2013, p. 45) bear a poignant witness to this emotional uncertainty: "I am a bad mother if I leave, but an even worse mother if I stay." For a participant in Sternberg and Barry's study (2011), the emotional pain of separation was so intense that she preferred to leave her country at night because she felt that saying "goodbye" to her children would have been unbearable.

When problems arise in TFs, migrant women tend to be blamed for having been inadequate mothers, wives, or daughters (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022), for being absent when their children needed them the most (Boccagni, 2012), and for an array of family issues such as the "increase in the number of divorces, male alcoholism, early pregnancies of adolescents, poor school performance of children, delinquency, drugs and including high incidence of child suicide or sexual abuse" (Parella Rubio, 2012, p. 672). As a mother's departure is generalized as having a

negative impact on children, women run the risk of being stigmatized and blamed for their children's issues (Ambrosini, 2015; Gao & Sacchetto, 2023; Kufakurinani et al., 2014; McCallum, 2019; Phoenix, 2011; Villamizar Puyana & Moreno Rojas, 2011). Ambrosini (2015, p. 441) described this as a phenomenon of "care drain" in which transnational mothers are blamed for "emotionally depriving" their children and, consequently, for creating a new form of social inequality.

Popular expressions that contribute to blaming parents—especially mothers—for having "orphaned" or "left behind" their kids should be problematized to prevent assuming that TFs are somewhat defective and that children have been necessarily hurt, and to avoid criticizing mothers for their absence or for "forgetting that they are the mothers" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 266) when their emigration is, instead, an act of care. These expressions contribute to the transnational mothers' self and social reproaching that they failed to be nurturing and present with their children. Transnational fathers tend to share these feelings too, although the reviewed literature pays more attention to mothers than fathers (Figure 1). In general, parents are concerned about having denied to their children the possibility of developing a strong bond and attachment with their parents (Dreby, 2006, 2015).

Despite these negative feelings and social criticisms, transnational parents often feel proud of contributing to a better future for their children and families, who may now enjoy forms of upward social mobility and well-being (Dito et al., 2017; Hershberg & Lykes, 2019; Poeze, 2019). Pride also derives from being the primary family providers (McCallum, 2019) and learning new skills and cultural models that they interpreted as positive for their children and family relationships, and which often concern reconstructions of gender. An example of adopting new cultural values and practices is migrant mothers' sense of "greater freedoms and eminence" in the process of challenging traditional and stereotypical gendered roles in their families and communities (McCallum, 2019, p. 427), which may lead to a renewed sense of themselves (Phoenix, 2011).

The partial adoption of new cultural traditions entails family negotiations that are often intense and challenging as they may require abandoning previous frames of reference and adopting new ones (Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Boccagni, 2012; McCallum, 2019). For migrant mothers, these new frames may take to a more assertive and clear communication style (see also the "Communication and the Creation of a Digital Relational Space" theme), which is especially instrumental to elaborate and justify to their children, the extended family, and themselves why they emigrated without their kids, and to help crafting practical strategies to keep strong family ties (McCallum, 2019; Peng & Wong, 2016).

Transnational mothers may feel the urge to compensate for the criticisms and stereotype threats that target them through constant demonstrations of their care, for instance, through remittances, gifts, letters, social-media communications, pictures, and video sharing (Ambrosini, 2015; Boccagni, 2012; Bonizzoni, 2012; Telve, 2019). Taken to an extreme, these practices of care from afar may become "intensive mothering" (Salazar Parreñas, 2005b, p. 262) and "transnational hyper-maternalism" (Tungohan, 2013, p. 41), such as through ongoing surveillance practices. These practices can be seen as strategies to find a balance between their physical absence and being charged with the responsibility of the economic security and emotional well-being of their children in the home country.

Gender, subjectivity, and family expectations: Constructions and negotiations

As seen above in relation to transnational mothering and fathering, in the literature on the emotional consequence of migration for transnational parents, gender is critical to shape and to interpret their experiences. Gender frames constructions, positionings, and expectations that are both internalized and relational, especially toward the home-country family and partner, such

as the widespread anticipation that the designated caretakers will be women (Sternberg & Barry, 2011). In rural Chinese TFs, for instance, the paternal grandmother is expected to take care of the children who remain at home (Liu & Erwin, 2015). Similarly, Latino migrant fathers in Italy delegate to their mothers the care of their children in the home country (Ambrosini, 2015). For Jamaican mothers in New York City, their sense of guilt reduces when the children's primary caretakers were their own mothers (McCallum, 2019).

These studies demonstrate that stereotypical attributions of gendered roles, skills, and duties still tend to be dominant in TFs, with little to no change in traditional gender patterns, especially concerning expectations of female caretaking and male authority, for instance, regarding the management of remittances (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017; Hernández Cordero, 2016). Even when fathers are the primary caretakers in the home country, transnational mothers may still feel responsible not only for their children but also for helping the fathers with nurturing and house-caring tasks (Cabanes & Acedera, 2012). The opposite direction of care (from fathers to mothers), instead, does not occur in the reviewed literature, except for financial or economic matters (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015; Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017; Hernández Cordero, 2016).

Another gendered separation that tends to be common in FTs, especially from traditionally Christian societies, concerns charging transnational mothers with the responsibility of practicing and transmitting moral values and religious traditions in the family, and keeping ties with the home community (Fuller, 2017). Transnational fathers, instead, tend to feel most responsible for the family "honor rather than morality," as Dreby reports in relation to "Mexican fathers' role in the family" (2006, p. 35). Fuller (2017) indicates that adopting traditional roles by transnational mothers can mitigate their worries about their extended separation from their family members in their home country (Hershberg & Lykes, 2019). Such gendered attribution and internalization of the caring role also concern how long remittances should extend in the lives of children (Salazar Parreñas, 2005a, 2005b). Overall, the gendered emphasis on financial providing by men and on affective care by women is present in most studies that deal with constructions of gender in TFs (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015).

Gender differences are also reported in the planning of family reunifications: Whereas transnational mothers are more concerned with keeping the family together and therefore contemplate the possibility of return, transnational fathers worry more about how their spouses and children can join them abroad to enjoy better job opportunities and improve the family's financial stability (Apatinga et al., 2022).

Some authors point out that the patriarchal dimensions of gender roles can be seen in relegating mothers to the family sphere, in judging them according to sharp all-or-nothing dichotomies attributed to motherhood, and in adopting a passive and submissive position in relation to men (Smith Silva, 2014). For instance, to avoid social criticism and to embrace the guilt of having left their children, some studies found that transnational mothers typically avoid narrations of amusement and enjoyment in the country of residence to prefer, instead, expressions of mourning (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010; Fuller, 2017; Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017). On the other hand, other studies argue that migration may contribute to shift gendered roles, expectations, and care responsibility (Alcalá & Leidl, 2006). Transnational mothers who assume the breadwinner role "acquire greater bargaining power within the couple" (Ambrosini, 2015, p. 454). The parent's separation from the original cultural and social context and the direct care of the children by male figures may challenge gender norms and serve as "a gender equalizer in a transnational context" (Dreby, 2006, p. 53).

Masculinity often undergoes reconstructions that challenge dominant cultural models, roles, and practices. In a transnational context, the contrast between evolving and traditional models of being a father and being a husband requires a constant renegotiation of masculinity—one that is plural and evolving (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Telve, 2019). Dialogues about gender roles and expectations may favor the development of positive masculinities in emigrant fathers, at-home older sons who take care of their younger siblings

(Hershberg, 2017; Hershberg & Lykes, 2019), and other male family members (Montes, 2013). Usually, this change defies strict gender-based binaries and hegemonic identifications and manifestations of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). International male migrants may embrace less rigid and conventional models of masculinity to find strength in collaboration, family unity, and the sharing of emotions, such as the affective "complexity involved in the decision to migrate" (Montes, 2013, p. 486). Yet, these personal and social negotiations of one's role and subjectivity are not easy as they entail deep changes in personal and social constructions of identity and in gendered dynamics within the family (Garabiles, 2020).

Home family and communities: Cohesion, tensions, and arrangements

When it comes to family harmony and solidarity, transnationality serves as a double-sided blade: On the one hand, it may further family unity by acknowledging the desire of being physically together, the improved socioeconomic status, and the migration sacrifice of parent(s) (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015; López Montaño, 2011). On the other hand, the family may feel more fragmented due to the geographical separation and the progressive decrease in shared meaningful experiences between those who migrated and those who stayed (Adebayo, 2020; Fuller-Iglesias, 2015; Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017). The (im)possibility of reunification and the duration of the separation, whether temporary or permanent, seem to be crucial to family unity, which migrant parents feel may be especially jeopardized for missing their children's growth (Apatinga et al., 2022; Molina, 2015) and "major family events, such as weddings or funerals" (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015, p. 1719).

Threats to family cohesion may also derive from unfulfilled expectations on the increase and distribution of wealth within the family (Kufakurinani et al., 2014) and from changes in cultural values and practices due to the adoption of new relational and interpretative models, for instance, about gendered roles and expectations (Apatinga et al., 2022; Lutz, 2018; Parella Rubio, 2007). Tensions between parents may also emerge in relation to structural changes in the TF, for instance, when one of the parents creates or joins a new family (Boccagni, 2012). Male partners who take care of the children in the home country mention marital instability, reverse remittances, and negative effects on children's well-being among the negative consequences of the female partner's departure that most jeopardize family cohesion (Apatinga et al., 2022). For some families, the partners' separation has "the potential to magnify problems that already existed in the relationship" (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015, p. 1719). Acting as a sort of crucible, the physical distance of one or both parents may result in either heightened family unity or separation (Apatinga et al., 2022; Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017).

The entanglement of expectations, meanings, and uncertainties that characterizes the experiences of transnational parents and their relationships with their family members shapes the possibilities for affects and emotions within TFs. To keep or construct harmony and well-being within TFs, ongoing dialogues about personal and reciprocal constructions (e.g., how I see you; how I would like to see you; how I think you see me; how I would like you to see me; how I think you would like me to see you) and about interpretations of experiences and emotions are key. Expectations, meanings, identifications, and roles are constantly shifting and, therefore, objects of dialogue and renegotiations. To this goal, family arrangements and communications are essential to ensure proper family functioning and harmony.

The critical role of family arrangements

When a family becomes transnational, this process of profound transformation requires clear arrangements and ongoing negotiations to give stability to the family system and to ensure its

proper family functioning, especially regarding roles, responsibilities, and expectations (López Montaño, 2011; Parella Rubio, 2007; Peng & Wong, 2016). Often considered a responsibility of mothers (Peng & Wong, 2016), these arrangements impact not only the quality of the children's upbringing and care but also the life quality of the overseas parents (Bonizzoni, 2015).

Remittances are usually central to these arrangements and contribute significantly to creating trustworthy bonds. Beyond providing economic and material support, the remittances sent by transnational parents act as a demonstration of family care and belonging (Best, 2014). They prove the parents' emotional commitment toward the family as a project, that is, in the present and the future (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017). Yet, the psychological function of remittances as demonstrations of parental care "depends directly on the social class of belonging and type of migratory project" of parents (Parella Rubio, 2007, p. 180). Within TFs, it becomes especially significant to understand remittances as mutual forms of social protection alongside intersecting lines of power, gender, social class, and generational differences. For instance, remittances are important not just for the kids but for the caretakers too, who fear to stop receiving support once their grandchildren grow up or if the parent(s) return or start a new family in the hosting society (López Montaño, 2011). What is often missing within TFs is a reflection and agreement on what care-needing and caregiving mean and create within the evolving relational and cultural contexts of the sending and the receiving communities, as in the case of Sudanese families in the Netherlands and the UK (Serra Mingot, 2020). Overall, the reviewed literature has given little attention to the affects and meanings attached to remittances.

The relationship with children's caretakers in the home country: A matter of trust and gender

Even if family arrangements cannot possibly cover all the scenarios and challenges of TFs, they are instrumental in increasing the parents' trust in their children's caretakers as emigrant parents experience limited control over the care of children or other vulnerable family members in the home country (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010; Gao & Sacchetto, 2023; Haagsman et al., 2015). Therefore, trusting the caretakers' ability to look after their children contributes significantly to the serenity and well-being of transnational parents (Sternberg & Barry, 2011), including their health (Dito et al., 2017) and job stability (Haagsman, 2018). In addition, trust is crucial to allow global parents to feel that they did not lose their role as good mothers or fathers, which is one of the main reasons they migrated (Boccagni, 2012; McCallum, 2019). This sense of trust can and needs to be constantly renewed through open and sincere communications, as we also mention for the "Communication and the Creation of a Digital Relational Space" theme.

In some cases, however, parents might feel they cannot fully trust their children's caretakers in their home country (Micolta León & García Vásquez, 2011). This mistrust tends to center on two levels. First, on issues of availability and reliability, for instance, concerning the caregivers' longevity, health, and competencies (Bonizzoni, 2015; Haagsman, 2018; Peng & Wong, 2016). Second, on concerns over the children's well-being, which typically entails two dimensions: socially, parents fear that caretakers are unable to control issues such as unsafe friendships, pregnancy risks, and organized crime (Micolta León & García Vásquez, 2011); emotionally, parents consider that their children's current caretakers are not as empathic and supportive as they would be. This latter dimension underscores that, sometimes, trust requires being ready to delegate the children's caretaking and being able to actively and critically reflect on the psychosocial possibilities and limits of this process.

Mistrust tends to increase when the father is the children's primary caretaker in the home country (Peng & Wong, 2016; Salazar Parreñas, 2008). In Gutiérrez Aldana's research (2017),

this link between gender and trust made father-away families more self-reliant and autonomous in their decision-making than when the mother was the parent who emigrated.

Trust tends to be linked to the gender of the main caretaker in the home country. When the father leaves, the mother usually keeps being responsible for their children. Instead, when the mother migrates, the responsibility falls onto other women in the family, usually grandmothers, aunts, or sisters (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022). The gendered dimension of parenting from abroad has then a direct impact on the ones who stay behind, tending to reinforce traditional gender performances and expectations of women as the main nurturers (Montes, 2013).

Communication and the creation of a digital relational space

The role of information and communication technologies (ICT)

ICT allow transnational parents to easily and affordably communicate with children and families in their home country. Seen as a widespread practice of care toward and identification with the family of origin, frequent communications have a protective purpose against the emotional pain of distance and loneliness (Bonizzoni, 2012; Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010; Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012; Telve, 2019). In some cases, some mothers admit feeling more connected to their children in transnationality than before their departure (Tungohan, 2013). Still, the duration of the separation may influence the content, frequency, and meaning of exchanges (Bonizzoni, 2012).

Despite the physical separation and the fear that their bond with their children may break (Dreby, 2006, 2015), emigrant parents can still achieve intimacy and long-distance care with their children and other member families, particularly through quality ICT communications that become forms of "co-presence" by combining "provision of needs and social-emotional support with socialization and upbringing" (Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012, p. 233). The relational space that ICT, such as social media, allows and the normalization of an "at-a-distance presence" can create a "feeling of togetherness" and "a virtual or imaginative social sphere" (Telve, 2019, pp. 720–721) that can be "real enough" (Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012, p. 220). This feeling develops through ICT communications that redefine togetherness in space and time (Yeoh et al., 2023, p. 429). This relational space is both symbolic and geographical (Telve, 2019) allowing parents to keep exercising their role in the family, and to keep crafting and negotiating their migration narratives. According to Acedera and Yeoh (2022),

> instead of treating the mediated space as a separate virtual space, the online and offline everyday spaces are entwined and mutually constitutive. […] The space of social media also allows for (re)negotiating different ways of 'doing' family in transnational and proximate space. (p. 216)

For instance, overseas parents can help their children with homework or advise them on eating habits, sharing experiences and knowledges that counter the psychosocial threat of losing their role as mother or father. Yet, it is important not to romanticize the role of ICT and consider their universal goodness for "doing family" (Madianou, 2016, p. 185) as they may also be source of contentious expectations about digital availability, imagined proximity, and being "always present" (Yeoh et al., 2023, p. 429). Time, in addition to space, is a crucial dimension that contributes to the complexity of communication and togetherness through ICT, as TFs often struggle "in synchronizing work time and family/social time across borders and time zones" (Yeoh et al., 2023, p. 429).

Communication filters and strategies

The affective importance of transnational communications explains why, on both sides, the content and style of verbal and non-verbal exchanges tend to be screened carefully. Because all parties worry for each other, information that may be hurtful or worrisome is often mitigated or filtered out. Even if done for protective reasons, "emotional filters" and a (too) careful selection of the information to be shared can be counterproductive and may increase mistrust, anxiety, and suspicion (Boccagni, 2012, p. 268), furthering rather than reducing the psychological and relational distance within TFs.

Although parents cannot be sure that their kids do not lie to them (Hershberg, 2017), a communication style that is open and sincere is useful against the suspicion of "secrecy and dishonesty," especially toward the partner, and the consequent feelings of "anger and betrayal" (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015, p. 1716). One strategy to deal with this hermeneutics of suspicion and the distance created by the adoption of communication filters is to try to be as sincere and transparent as possible. The quality rather than the frequency of communication is crucial to avoid "a growing sense of emotional distance" (Yarris, 2014, p. 485). For the partner, children, and caretakers in the home country, when "key transcendental aspects of the family and the couple, such as affective relationships and demonstration, are left aside, deterioration and burn-out may result in some cases" (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017, p. 177).

Another strategy involves the parents adopting a more collaborative relational style rather than a correcting or micro-educating one. Switching from ruling to listening and suggesting allows parents to adopt a less-directive and more integrative parenting style, which may prevent kids from omitting information or lying to parents (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017; Hershberg, 2017). In addition, whenever possible, "periodic and regular face-to-face encounters are important and necessary for broadening the material and social-emotional dimensions of care and belonging" (Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012, p. 233) and for building a sense of continuity with the home community.

Communication limits in the transnational care triangle

The transnational care triangle of parents, children, and caretakers needs a constant reaffirmation of references and meanings, "which can barely be satisfied through oral communication alone" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 273) because "relying only on transnational communication inevitably leaves space for significant ambivalences" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 267). For instance, Madianou and Miller (2011) observed that, for older children, the process of constituting an intimate relationship with their mother was more challenging than for younger children whose relationship with the mother was technology-mediated earlier in life. Overall, the age of children and the length of separation are likely to play an important role in the relationships between parents and children (Gutiérrez Aldana, 2017). Last, communication practices and their ability to alleviate distance need to be contextualized within each family's functioning and well-being (Bonizzoni, 2012). For instance, "although the mobile phone can contribute to increasing cooperation between left-behind fathers and migrant mothers, it more often than not amplifies the complexity of already complicated conjugal power relations" (Cabanes & Acedera, 2012, p. 927).

Imagining family reunification: Narratives on the future and the future as narrative

Within TFs, reunification within a short time is typically a dominant and shared narrative, which foster cohesion, belonging, and intimacy (Parella Rubio, 2007; Phoenix, 2011; Veale &

Andres, 2020). Imagining and planning the family reunification are ways of showing present and future care by asserting the phenomenological presence of specific members in the lives of overseas parents. As a narrative, prospects of family reunification contribute to sustain the sense of family belonging and unity, while also imagining, asserting, and reassuring family members about the desire of a future reunification. This process allows family members in the home country "to sustain family life" in the absence of physical relating (Veale & Andres, 2020, p. 763) and to smoothen the sharp dichotomy between a permanent separation and the rejoining with the emigrant familiar (Fuller, 2017). This dichotomy is especially present in the lives of irregularized migrants whose mobilities are highly reduced.

The decision on whether parents return or family members join them overseas is the result of intense, though not always verbalized, negotiations with—and, at times, beyond (Bonizzoni, 2012)—the emigrant parent(s), caretakers, and children triangle. In any case, reunification should not be assumed to be the most desirable outcome for all family members.

Numerous processes affect the possibility of family reunification. First, the administrative procedures associated with the process may result in a deep sense of frustration and impotence for TF members (Apatinga et al., 2022; Mcguire & Martin, 2007; Veale & Andres, 2020). Second, the economic dependence and social upward mobility that remittances allow would be lost in case of return. Last, family reunification may also be a source of concern and anxiety for children, who may experience a sense of loss when leaving their caretakers to join their parents overseas, and for grandparents too, who might lose their "life-affirming" caretaking role (Yarris, 2014, p. 493). In addition, grandparents may worry over losing the opportunity of being taken cared for by their grandchildren and seeing a reduction of the received remittances.

Despite the commonality of the reunification narrative, return or reunification "is seldom achieved" (Cienfuegos Illanes, 2010, p. 217). When reunification appears highly unlikely, parents look for narratives and strategies to help cope with the distance and be present in the lives of their relatives (López Montaño, 2011), for instance, through remittances and other symbolic forms of care (Parke & Cookston, 2021), such as the project of building a house in the home country—a symbolic narrative which tends to be common among Latino transnational fathers (Salazar Parreñas, 2008).

DISCUSSION

Through our meta-synthesis of the literature, we have highlighted that the psychosocial and relational challenges of transnational parenting tend to center around the six main intersecting thematic areas of Figure 2. Transnational care practices, such as remittances and quality communications, and the parents' constructions of their migration have a mutually constitutive effect to reconstruct and renegotiate roles within the TF. For all members of a TF, these processes tend to be deeply emotional and contentious, both personally and relationally. They are typically linked to a sense of loss and guilt, feeling disoriented, and being concerned about trust and the future in their TF.

As previously discussed, the experiences and challenges of being a transnational parent are not isolated from larger discourses on migration and gender, both of which are (re)produced within the relational, social, cultural, and political contexts in which TFs live. Within these contexts, gender constructions, expectations, and positionings play a major role, both at the local or micro level of family relationship and at the macro level of social narratives and discourses. Changes in personal and social expectations can especially be a source of tensions in the family.

Planning and imagining the future entails crafting narratives that help making sense of the family transnationality (e.g., the justifications that parents give to their children about having left the home country). These narratives also contribute to create a shared sense of family cohesion, especially through imaginations on the family future, which usually entails storying the

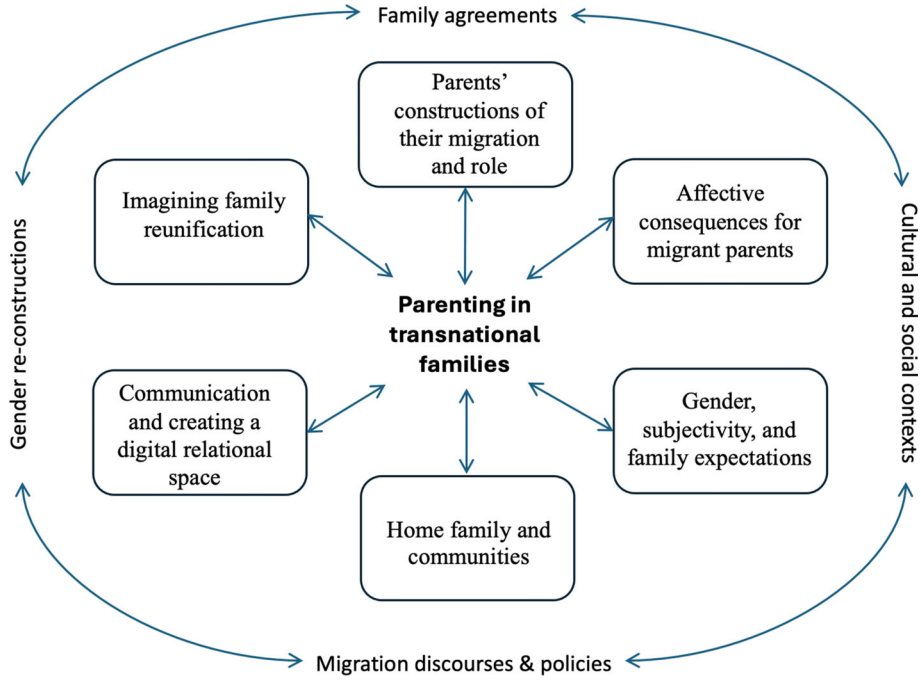

FIGURE 2 Processes and constructions that most contribute to the affectivities, experiences, and power dynamics of transnational parents. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

family reunification. This relational process allows parents to project their desires of family belonging and care, as well as to act for the materialization of their plans. It also helps mitigating their everyday experiential challenges. Yet, futures plans need to face migration discourses and policies or, in case of return, possible losses of wealth and status. Both dimensions of care and future-planning are simultaneously material and symbolic, as they include concrete actions and objects as well as values, meanings, and imaginations that are relational, social, cultural, and political (Veale & Andres, 2020).

Overarching these thematic lines is the ongoing practice of negotiating more or less formal and explicit family arrangements, which relates to all of the other themes as well as to the discourses on gender, migration, and family transnationality. These agreements are instrumental to maintain active family ties and practices of care in TFs. Closely tied with family arrangements are the shifting subjective identifications—both personal and social—of members within the family, for instance, regarding allegiances and dynamics of gender, empowerment, roles, responsibilities, and control. For all processes, dynamics of trust and communication, gendered expectations and identifications, social and cultural contexts, and discourses on migration both in the home and the host relational environment act as major affective forces of power and possibilities.

This research has shown the importance of considering both micro and macro levels of analysis, in an ecological framework (American Psychological Association, 2017) able to generate "understanding of family structure as a complex and nuanced developmental context for parents and children—a context that is embedded within a larger web of social systems" (Jensen & Sanner, 2021, p. 478). As such, it also contributes to the literature by stressing the social and discursive dimensions of family, and its constant interaction with the political, economic, and cultural contexts in which family is both practiced and experienced.

This meta-synthesis of the literature on family reconfigurations and the emotional and psychosocial impact of migration on migrating parents leads to complex valuations, which cannot be reduced to either positive or negative judgments. Relational and affective processes blend beyond dichotomies to become simultaneously upsetting and constructive. Similarly, the concreteness of identity labels (e.g., transnational mother or left-behind child) does not do justice to the flexible and, at times, contradictory narratives of parents who emigrate without their children. In this sense, transnationality "is not a new family identity in its own right" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 264).

The complexity of our findings about the experiences of TFs may explain why researchers in this field primarily chose qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviewing and ethnography. In its turn, the adoption of these methodologies tends to lead to complex and multifaceted results (Thorne, 2019). The prevalence of reflexive qualitative methodologies in the reviewed literature underscores their ability to identify and analyze the shifting and contextual constructions and narratives of TF affectivities, experiences, and dynamics.

Although the emigration of one or both parents is likely to be emotionally and pragmatically significant, it is not always lived or narrated as a traumatic event. Transnationality may, for instance, be part of a larger family project that started before some family members' emigration. We, therefore, agree with Dito and colleagues' suggestion to "shift the focus of transnational parenting from being a separation issue to it being a migration project—a project typically initiated to economically provide for children and families in the home country" (Dito et al., 2017, p. 11). Space and time, as well as presence and the primacy of physical touch, are likely to become reconfigured in transnationality (Ratcliffe, 2018). ICT and communication practices may allow for reconsidering these dimensions of being-with within TFs: "being together in time across space" (Yeoh et al., 2023, p. 429), through the creation of togetherness in synchronicity, for example, eating "together" at the same time over ICT.

Changes in gendered constructions in TFs

The literature appears inconclusive on whether migration favors more liberal and egalitarian distributions of power and responsibility within the TF. In any case, the creation and reproduction of easy binaries that do not account for evolving definitions of gender and gendered roles, such as fatherhood (Hershberg & Lykes, 2019; Montes, 2013) and motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Horton, 2009) in transnationality, should be avoided.

Migration appears to entail apparently contradictory roles on women, as those who emigrate become the new main providers while still being reminded of their nurturing responsibilities, whereas those who stay are expected to intensify their caring responsibilities (Micolta León, 2011). It is then vital to bear in mind that transnational negotiations and changes in gender-based constructions and roles occur against a background of dominant discourses, which are produced and renewed within institutions, mass-media communications, and political narratives (Gemignani & Jiménez Carrasco, 2023). For instance, the intersection of migration with international market structures and global economic interests tends to facilitate the incorporation of migrant women mostly into the care and domestic paid work (Lutz, 2017).

To analyze the experiences of women in the context of migration, asymmetrical pulling forces, and international power dynamics requires including a gender analysis (March et al., 1999) to understand specific changes of family dynamics. This meta-synthesis has provided a further demonstration of the importance of integrating micro and macro analysis of psychosocial changes (American Psychological Association, 2017; Frosh et al., 2024). These discourses have a real-life impact on family dynamics, for instance, contributing to tensions related to gendered expectations concerning the care of TF children (Phoenix, 2011). Given the restructuring of equilibria and dynamics in TFs, the experience of new stressors and challenges, and

the development of new role possibilities and models, TFs often need to permanently renegotiate their internal and social relations, especially in relation to gendered constructions, practices, and narratives. These negotiations typically "shift the generational, economic, affective, and power relations within the household, both in the home and the host country" (Parella Rubio, 2012, p. 679).

Thinking beyond traditional family models

Embedded in the very concept of TF is the observation that all its members "are experiencing the cross-border living and mobility change" (Telve, 2019, p. 716). As considerations on what counts as family and traditional vary significantly across cultures (Baldassar & Merla, 2014), the migration of one or both parents may also shape relations and affects in the extended-family community. Interpreting the relationship between the family and the community-as a continuum may allow to reconsider the relationship between family and locality, for example, by shifting from the traditional family's spatial stability to an online version (Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012; Telve, 2019) or by considering the role of individuals and institutions outside the nuclear family in the migrant parents', children', and caretakers' coping success (Parke & Cookston, 2021).

A family member's psychosocial, affective, and relational issues are not just the result of personal will or internal psychological dynamics. Rather, they need to be considered through an ecological and multilayered approach (American Psychological Association, 2017). From this frame of reference, the personal, family, and national and international sociopolitical contexts converge, making it reductive to focus on one layer without considering the constitutive role of the others. For instance, extended and multigenerational family models distribute care and responsibility beyond the nuclear family and provide flexible fostering arrangements (Best, 2014; Hernández Cordero, 2016; Kufakurinani et al., 2014). Furthermore, the lived experiences of TF members are not independent from local politics on migration, class, and gender (Liu & Erwin, 2015), the family's specific social and economic context (Villamizar Puyana & Moreno Rojas, 2011), and from ideological and political constructions of transnational parenting and care (Merla et al., 2020; Micolta León, 2011).

Aspects such as the neoliberal labor precariousness (Bryceson, 2022; Yeoh et al., 2023) further help to contextualize and therefore understand the TF phenomenologies. Most often, vulnerable migration originates from complex humanitarian emergencies and tragedies of hopelessness, whose health, social, and economic impacts are highly gendered on both sides of the border (Abubakar et al., 2018). As we show in our work, the psychosocial experiences, concerns, and challenges of parents and caretakers in TFs are not isolated from shifts in power-based gender dynamics within the TF. As consequence, understanding the unique ways in which TFs "traverse economic, political, and cultural borders must be considered for therapy to be effective" (McDowell, 2015, p. 61) as it allows for the inclusion of contextual and power-based constructions of borders (Agier, 2016; McDowell, 2015). These borders may act as boundaries in family functioning, for instance by adding a symbolic distance to the physical one, which translates in the overseas parents' perception of lack of agency and control over their children's lives (Gao & Sacchetto, 2023). They simultaneously reproduce, challenge, and offer opportunities for new reconfigurations of family roles (Parke & Cookston, 2021), which extend beyond physical presence and the belief on the primacy of touch in human relations (Ratcliffe, 2018).

Limitations of the study

A limitation to our database search was that it only included articles on migrant parents who leave their children in their home country. However, other less frequent scenarios were not

included in our search, such as "astronaut parents" who return to their home country, leaving their children in the country to which the family migrated (Ho & Bedford, 2008, p. 43), refugee families in which parents go to a third country to work, or families in which the figure of the biological and legal parent do not match. We also omitted the numerous cases of families in which one or more children or parents move internally within a country. In addition, TF assemblages and relationships may go beyond the nuclear family and include the migration of community members considered to be part of the extended family (Kufakurinani et al., 2014).

These scenarios remind us of the complexity and variability of configurations that TFs may take. Nonetheless, we opted to continue with the chosen search strategy and method as it encompassed the most common circumstances for family transnationality (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). We are well-aware, however, that specific social, cultural, and political contexts may have a direct impact on the experiences and outcomes of TFs, including practices of family care and the affective consequences that migrating without one or more of their children may have for transnational parents.

Last, the reviewed literature does not directly engage with migration policies and the role of the state or the welfare system in shaping the kind and quality of care, future perspectives, and arrangements in TFs. This is a missing yet relevant element. Ultimately, the state holds the power to regulate practical aspects of TF arrangements, such as reunifications, professional interventions, or mobilities, as well as formal and normalizing definitions of family and parent–child relationships (Redmond & Martin, 2023). Because of this, we recommend exploring the role that the state and broader global dynamics play for the well-being of transnational and migrant families.

CONCLUSION

Becoming transnational is an intense process that requires some form of psychosocial adjustment to all members of the family. Transnationality brings profound reconfigurations of family dynamics and negotiations of power, in terms of both controlling or impacting on one's doing and allowing for new possibilities and becomings in the family. As evidenced in this metasynthesis, central to these family dynamics are local and sociocultural constructions of how migrant parents and other family members understand and act upon the migration of one or more parent(s). These constructions also affect parenting from abroad and their narratives on the family future. In particular, constructions of gendered expectations and roles are key in the communications, agreements, negotiations, and reconfigurations that affect TFs and the experiences of migrant parents. Although challenging, family transnationality may also allow new and functional family reconfigurations, especially in some areas of the global South in which emigration is a dominant discourse in the framing of family opportunities and futures.

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