How migration to Europe affects those left behind

Megan Passey

Families are frequently separated as a result of migration and displacement from the Middle East to Europe, yet humanitarian aid is often difficult to access and insufficient to meet the needs of those left behind.

Family members play an important role in the decision to leave home, including those who do not intend to travel. Decisions about leaving are usually discussed over several months, with the well-being of all family members considered, yet the extent of planning and preparation for those who stay – be it temporarily or indefinitely – can vary significantly. Research conducted in 2017 by REACH and the Mixed Migration Platform into the impact of family separation as a result of migration from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan[1] indicated that, despite a relatively high awareness of European Union (EU) migration policies, all participants had underestimated the time needed to reach their planned destination and for their asylum claim to be processed. As a result, preparation and planning for those left behind was limited, often with negative consequences for those still at home.

Changes in vulnerability

Those left behind can be both positively and negatively affected. Since family members may face different levels of risk depending on their age, gender, occupation and political affiliation, the departure of just one individual can sometimes have positive implications for rest of the family. This was especially common for the families of young men approaching the age of military recruitment but was also relevant in other cases where one family member faced a specific risk. "My wife was feeling very unsafe [as a Christian woman] because of the presence of ISIS," explained one Iraqi man, whose wife travelled to Germany to join their

daughters. "Now I feel safer because she is safe." In other cases, however, migration could lead to multiple challenges, preventing those left behind from accessing basic rights and meeting their everyday needs.

Restricted access to livelihoods or reduced household income was the most commonly reported change, particularly if the person who left was the main earner. In order to cope, people left behind sold assets, such as cars and furniture; moved to lower-quality accommodation; reduced expenditure on essentials such as winter heating; took on illegal work; and removed children from school so that they could work instead. Several of these strategies placed families at risk of apprehension by authorities, jeopardised their access to protection and services, and increased their vulnerability in the longer term.

Access to basic services, such as health-care and education, could often be more challenging for those left behind. Simply physically reaching services was sometimes harder than before due to a lack of funds to pay for transport, while the lack of a male chaperone could also be problematic. Even when access was possible, limited financial resources affected families' ability to pay for consultations, medicine and school books.

The safety and security of those remaining could vary considerably, depending on which member of the family left. The departure of a dependent son or daughter seldom had negative consequences in terms of access to protection; in contrast, women and children generally felt more vulnerable when an adult male left. Several women reported struggling to reach the local market or accompany older children to school because there was nobody else to care for infants. In other cases, women deliberately limited their movements outside the house because of fear of harassment.

Roles and responsibilities within the family often changed. As before, changes were most marked when the main earner or head of family was the one to leave, generally leaving women or older sons to assume the role of head of household. Greater reliance on extended family networks was

also common, although this came at the expense of a shifting balance of power. "I used to have more control of my life and my children's lives before we moved," explained one Syrian woman, who moved in with her brother-in-law after her husband left.

The psychological effects of family separation on health also emerged as a common theme. Many families spoke about the pain of separation, and their fear for the safety of those who had left. In several cases, this had contributed to depression or exacerbated existing medical conditions.

Humanitarian assistance for family members left behind was often difficult to access and insufficient to meet needs. Following the departure of a male head of family, female-headed households faced particular difficulties in re-registering to receive aid in their own names, in one case leading to a twelve-month delay. Once registered, families were generally entitled to lower levels of assistance than before, since their family size had decreased, even though their needs were sometimes greater.

What exacerbates vulnerability?

A little over half of the families interviewed had made no contingency plans at all, reducing their ability to cope after separation. Those least likely to make contingency plans were families who imagined only a temporary separation, and whose preparations, made on the assumption that reunification would be possible in a matter of months rather than years, proved insufficient. Although families who envisaged a longer-term separation were more likely to take steps to protect those who stayed, these measures could also fall short, especially if they were hoping to rely on remittances from Europe to repay debts associated with migration. Of those Syrian and Iraqi families who had hoped to receive remittances, over half had received nothing at all.

The situation of families left behind can deteriorate very quickly. The short-term nature of contingency planning meant that many families were forced to turn to other solutions within a matter of months. Coping strategies such as

dropping out of school in order to work were typically employed shortly after a family member's departure, highlighting the importance of early identification and intervention if recourse to such hard-to-reverse strategies is to be prevented.

The single most important strategy observed to protect those left behind was for the household's main earner to stay behind. This enabled families to maintain access to a monthly income, allowing them to continue more or less as before. In contrast, families comprising a woman on her own with young children were typically the most vulnerable. These families were the most likely to report a range of protection concerns, suffer from reduced incomes and describe difficulties accessing civil documentation and aid.

Limited access to humanitarian assistance can further exacerbate difficulties. Our research found that families were most likely to require humanitarian assistance shortly after a family member's departure. Paradoxically, this was when aid was most difficult to access due to a lack of knowledge about the need to re-register, challenges navigating the system, and delays while requests were processed.

Implications for aid providers and policymakers

Humanitarian responders could better respond to changing vulnerability following migration in several ways:

- speed up re-registration processes to avoid gaps in access to aid

- incorporate 'contingency planning' into vulnerability and targeting criteria, allowing those vulnerable as a result of migration to be identified and assisted more easily

- provide targeted livelihoods support for families who lose their source of income as a result of migration, together with practical skills training for those managing family finances for the first time

- mobilise trusted channels to share accurate information about migration (including safe legal alternatives) to enable

UNHCR/Tanya Habjouqa

A Syrian refugee is showing her son text messages from his father who left months before for Europe, leaving his 15-year-old son as the only breadwinner at home. The children send photos and their father responds with advice for studies – and lullabies for the youngest.

individuals to make informed decisions and prepare adequately for the time it takes to reunite

- facilitate access to support, including peer-to-peer counselling, to help families deal with the psychosocial strain of separation.

It is important to recognise, however, that recourse to irregular migration is a coping strategy in itself. For many of the families interviewed, irregular migration was a last resort, only considered after attempts to use safe and legal pathways had failed. Although fewer than half had plans to reunify once in Europe, all had been affected by restrictive policies and slow asylum processing. For those hoping to reunite, prolonged family separation places lives on hold, adds to psychological distress and erodes families' ability to cope. Current EU and member state policies mean that safe and legal alternatives to irregular migration are too often inaccessible, while the slow and uneven implementation of existing policies often exacerbates challenges for those at home, as well as those on the move.

Megan Passey *meganpassey@gmail.com*
Independent consultant

1. REACH/MMP (2017) *Separated Families: who stays, who goes and why?* http://bit.ly/REACH-MMP-separated-families