

**Panel:**

**“MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FAMILY”**

**MIGRATION AS A CAUSE OF FAMILY DISINTEGRATION**

**Fernando Valadez Perez**  
Academic and Research Specialist

The five core messages of this paper are:

1. The migration of a family member results in family breakdown.
2. The deportation of a family member can lead to a traumatic impact on the family members remaining in the United States.
3. Family disintegration causes depression over the loss of one or more family members.
4. When priority is given to economic aspects, emotional and relationship issues are relegated.
5. As male migration dominates, women adopt new roles.

**Migration and family disintegration**

Today's families. The traditional family model of breadwinner, a housewife devoted to her children, and the gender-differentiated education of children is declining significantly, leading to new experimental models.

There is no single new family model. The new model of couple and family, especially for the new roles women are playing which are changing the male-female relationship is under construction.

Today we have couples and families where the women work and bring home either a lower, equal or higher income than the male. This means that women can no longer be a full-time mother exclusively.

We know today that full-time mothering and parenting is very important in the first year of the child's life. After it is essential that the child begin the process of socialization, so that in an ideal model, parents can work for 8 hours at their jobs and the children stay in the nursery or school for the same length of time.

There are families in which women cannot afford to spend a year with their child, they can only enjoy the three months' leave and then return to work.

Mexico still does not grant paternity leave to men. Some countries already grant a year's leave for mothers and fathers.

While there are some men who are already help in household chores and are more active as parents, they still represent a minority. The woman is left with the famous double shift. Work outside and work inside the home. This unjust situation often leads to separation and divorce.

This leads to other family models:

- Female heads of households who absorb the household expenses in the absence of the father.
- Women with a pension.
- Sons and daughters, who have contact with their father at weekends or every fortnight.
- Men left in charge of the children who have weekly, fortnightly or sporadic contact with their mother.

- Yours, Mine & Ours, families made up of partners both with children from a previous marriage who join up to rebuild a new nuclear family.

These are just some examples to show that today we cannot talk about the family, we have to specify which type of family we are referring to.

## **Families of Migrant Workers**

I will refer to some family situations regarding those who are left behind.

The most common situation is where the male head of the household has emigrated from Mexico to the United States. He leaves a wife, sons and/or daughters. Some have called it the Penelope syndrome, the woman waiting, children waiting, the family begins to disintegrate and has to reorganize itself in order to function properly.

The woman adopts new roles, since although she receives money from her husband, she has to start doing new things that only her husband did before, such as managing the money.

From a psychological point of view, the families that stay behind first go through the sadness of the loss of their member, even if only a temporary loss. Then they experience anxiety, caused by the departure of one or more members of the family, not knowing whether they will return or not, what could happen to them, and whether they will send money or not.

Often the economic situation increases and the sense of family togetherness decreases. Emotional mobilization of the entire family increases.

These families face different scenarios in the future:

Maybe the husband will return soon through repatriation, with the weight of failure.

Or the husband returns after several years. He has not seen their children grow up, sometimes they hardly know him and they do not respect his authority.

When they return the re-adaptation process is as complicated as their adaptation in the United States. In some instances the wife has grown, she has matured, which has led her to change her traditional role as homemaker and wife. The man finds a different woman from the one he left behind.

Sometimes the husband becomes a circular migrant, spending periods in Mexico and others in the United States, so there are moments of disintegration and reintegration.

Another scenario might be that the husband does not return any more, finding a new partner and family in the United States. This represents a loss situation for the whole family, a sadness and anger that can lead to symptoms of depression of varying degree, in one or more family members. The wife, if coming from a small town, lives the shame of having been betrayed, not only because her husband was unfaithful, but because he betrays a whole life plan.

Another scenario is that the husband returns home to his wife, but another man has taken his place.

Another type of family is the broken home caused by repatriation. One or both parents are repatriated as illegal immigrants but they have children who are U.S. citizens by birth, who then remain in the United States, sometimes with a family member, sometimes under government care. Parents go from depression for the loss of their children to a great anxiety, not knowing whether they will ever see their children again.

Children themselves undergo the same emotional situation, especially if they don't stay with relatives. It is truly an inhuman situation. This disintegration is caused by the U.S. government which does not see the sometimes irreversible psychological damage that can happen to these human beings.

In another model, one spouse returns voluntarily, often women who are unable to adapt to the new environment or because they are mistreated by their husbands.

Not all people have the same mental strength to adapt to a new environment that is frequently hostile to them.

In the case of the spouse who stays in the U.S. or Mexico but is separated from their children, they usually manifest latent depression, sometimes denied, but that often has psychosomatic consequences.

Another situation, although less frequent, is when the mother migrates and leaves her husband and children and sends them money. Some authors say that the loss of the mother is more painful for children than the loss of the father. The fact is that there is a temporary loss similar to the departure of the father.

When the mother leaves, she misses the development process of her children, depending on how old they were when she emigrated, and scenarios are the same as those described above, such as circular migration, returning after several years or not returning at all.

Another situation is that of older people returning to their places of origin after a long stay in America, because they want to die in Mexico. Here, family breakdown is the reverse, since their children and grandchildren and other relatives stay behind.

Sometimes they suffer from depression since the place they return to is no longer the same. Everything has changed and an adaptive process equal or similar to the beginning of migration, such as *"I don't belong here nor there"*, seems to happen to these people.

A woman who returned to Mexico after 20 years, told me that in the U.S. she was very well off financially, with multiple material satisfactions, but she had returned after 20 years because she had a constant longing for her country, her family of origin, food, language, etc. On top of the problem of re-adapting she herself faced, there was also an adaptation problem for her children born and bred in the United States.

All exiles suffer in the same way. Many Argentines, Chileans and Uruguayans who returned home after the dictatorships had ended left sons and daughters behind in

Mexico. Many were unable to adapt to the new situation in their home country and returned to Mexico.

While I have raised family breakdown situations of Mexican immigrants to the United States, the same can be said of Central American immigrants in our country. Family break-ups are similar, both in the case of those who go to the United States and those who remain in Mexico.

Sometimes it is single women and men who migrate and establish a nuclear family in the host country. While we cannot strictly speak of family disintegration, we find similar patterns from the emotional point of view, both in the family of origin and the migrant family.

The migration of children and adolescents is considerably increasing, not only among people on the borders, but also from several parts of the country. Children who are being abused or who have no perspective in life, see no chance of education, no work in Mexico, sometimes flee their family of origin or migrate with the permission of parents, especially those from rural areas where adulthood begins at an earlier age and adolescence is frequently erased.

When there is no parental consent, the emotional impact is much stronger, since they do not know whether the child was abducted, or died. This disappearance creates great trauma for all members of the family.

The impact is not so strong when the migration is with permission. The degree of vulnerability of children is higher and they may be deceived, be drawn into white slave trade networks or even be killed for organ harvesting. But many, perhaps most of them, make it to America and find different kinds of jobs.

Mental health is the ugly duckling of health. We always leave it till last. Organizations focus on the legal or economic aspects and ignore the mental health of migrants. Only a few organizations take into account the psychological and psychosocial aspects of migrants and their families. At *Universidad Intercontinental* we have a specialist course in the psychological care of migrants, short term therapy and two care centers. When we looked around to see what courses were available in the world, we found that only England and Mexico offer a graduate program for

mental health and counseling services specifically for migrants. There are counseling centers for migrants, but very few of them. It is a population whose human rights are constantly violated and there are repercussions on their capacity for thought and feelings.

The strength of the psychic structure of the members of a family is tested from the moment migrants leave home until they return or do not return.

Our aim is to approach the psychological perspective of mental and emotional regulation, by informing the families of migrants that what happens to them, how their thoughts and feelings are altered, is the same that happens to any family that loses one of its members temporarily.

Focusing psychology not on the pathological aspect, but rather addressing what happens to most migrant families that do not suffer from mental illness.

On the social side we want people to be aware of their human rights, their legal possibilities, promote adaptation and knowledge of the new family situation, for this reason we send the family to institutions dealing with other aspects of the migrant family.

On the academic side, we believe that migration needs to be studied from the multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary aspects. We try to attend the various interdisciplinary seminars and academic events on the subject to try to gain as comprehensive an understanding as possible.

In online counseling via the Internet, we provide migrants with counseling and information on what is happening to the migrant or his family, or what will happen to them, emotionally and mentally.

We try to arrange for migrants to be treated at the scene from where they are consulting us and channel them according to their psychosocial needs. We are gradually building up a database.

We are about to start a research project, of cyber family reunion, via the Internet, with the University of California at Long Beach, in the United States. Here in Mexico we will see to the migrant's family, over there they will see to the migrant, and with

video conference technology, the family will be reunited cybernetically, seeing, hearing, feeling and meeting with each other. This center is very new and is at an experimental phase.

I was pleased to hear the couple who gave their testimony of how this technology can help them to keep in touch with their adult children in different parts of the world. Let us make use of this technology to foster this family reunification.