Transnational Families

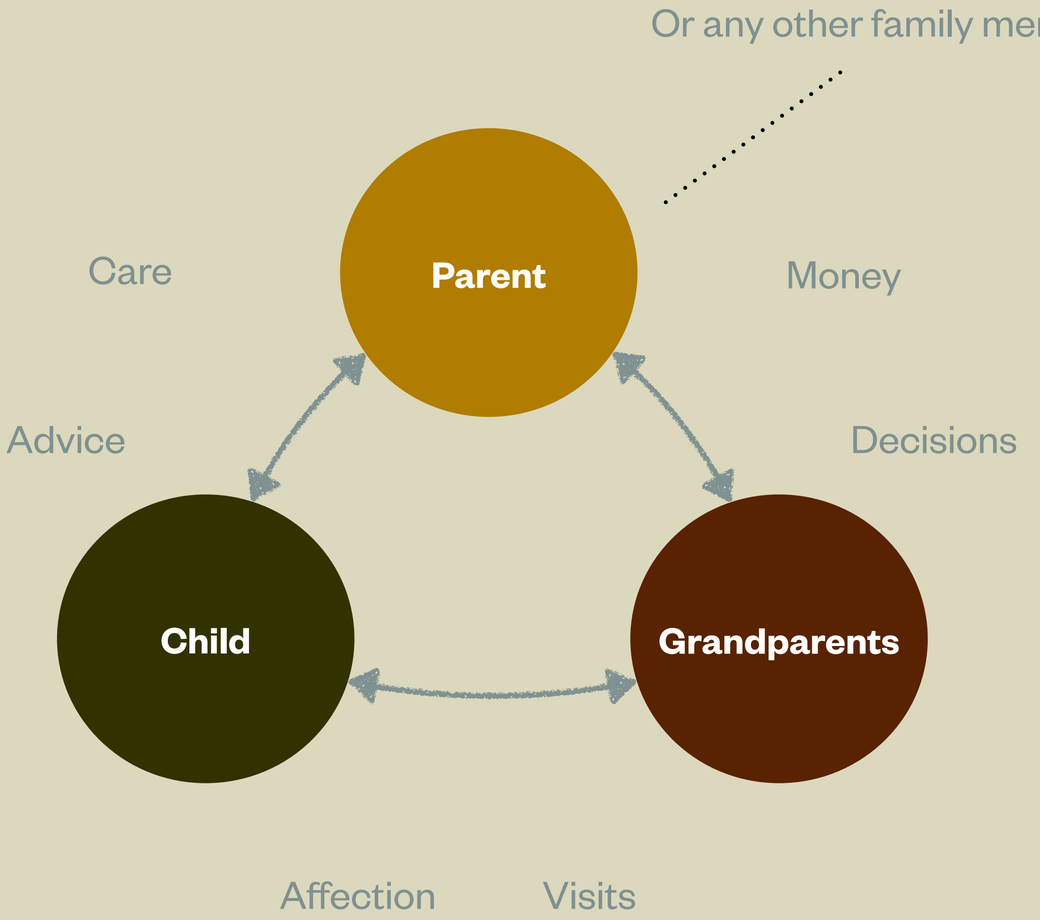
Taking stock of key challenges and solutions

COFACE - 7 October 2026

Maastricht University Karlijn Haagsman



Family does not stop at the border



Transnational families are physically dispersed across countries, but continue to sustain a sense of familyhood.

Household ≠ being one geographical location

Migrant may be producing income abroad while other family members carry out the functions of reproduction, socialization, and consumption in the country of origin

Look at relationships and care networks, not only households and co-residence

Prevalence

Millions of children grow up while one or both parents live in another country, but we still do not know how many globally

For example, according to UNICEF

15.9 % of children in Moldova had at least one parent abroad in 2024 (UNICEF/ National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2025)

20.4% of *Nepalese* children aged 0-17 had at least one biological parent living abroad in 2019 (UNICEF, 2019)

377,000 children in *Kyrgyzstan* had one or both parents working abroad in 2024 (UNICEF, 2023)

27% / 9 million children in the *Philippines* had one or both parents working abroad (UNICEF)

Though no global estimate Comparable international data on children living apart from migrant parents does not exist

The people affected by migration extend far beyond those who themselves cross borders

25 Years of research

From **Left Behind**
Early 2000s

- Migrant mothers
- Children in origin countries
- Costs of separation

Strong concern with:
- Care drain
- Gender norms
- Wellbeing

To **Care Circulation**
2010s

- Fathers
- Caregivers
- Older parents
- Family members are active participants
- Digitally mediated family life

Exchange different kinds care:
- Emotional
- Practical
- Financial

To **Structures** and **Life Course**
Now

Transnational family life is dynamic and shaped by:
- Migration Regimes
- Welfare Systems
- Labour markets
- Crises
- Inequality

Growing attention to:
- Extended kin
- Forced displacement
- Institutional Recognition

from Separation -> to Relationships -> to the Conditions under which families can sustain those relationships

Separation does not automatically mean worse outcomes

Care arrangements, relationships, resources, legal status and context shape wellbeing

Stability	Is there a stable secure caregiving arrangement?
Relationship	Does the caregiver support and facilitate the parent-child relationship?
Resources	Are there enough financial, digital and social resources?
Mobility & Status	Can family members visit, reunite, and respond when care needs change?
Context	How do schools, welfare systems, community support and conflict or crisis shape family life?

Not all families have the same capacity to “do family” across borders

	Condition	What restricts it?	Possible consequences
Legal status	Undocumented / precarious status	Travel, visits and family reunification	Prolonged separation; less ability to intervene when care arrangements break down
Income & Work	Low income/ insecure work	Remittances, visits and flexibility to provide care	Strain on caregivers and relationships; reduced capacity to respond to changing needs
Conflict & Displacement	Unsafe or impossible return	Physical visits and sometimes even regular digital contact	Existing trauma and distress can be compounded by prolonged separation
Gender & Care	Gendered expectations and unequal care burdens	Who can migrate, who must stay, and who carries care work	Different family members face unequal pressures and wellbeing consequences

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These inequalities intersect: precarious status often also means lower income, restricted mobility and weaker access to support.

Care is not unidirectional, but circulates

Families ‘do family’ through multiple forms of exchange



digital presence



financial support



medical care



emotional care



advice and decisions



Practical care



visits / embodied care











Care is relational: different people give and receive different forms of support at different moments

ICTs can create a strong sense of “being together” but they do not remove need physical mobility, legal rights, resources or embodied care

What remains under-researched and unrecognized

Who

Siblings • Grandparents • Partners living apart • Patchwork families • Non-kin carers • Queer families • People with disabilities

When

How relationships change across childhood, ageing, reunification, return, onward migration and long periods of uncertainty

Where

Forced displacement • Irregularised families • Less studied migration corridors • Privileged and vulnerable mobile families

How systems matter

The combined effects of migration law, welfare rules, schools, employers, digital infrastructure and bureaucratic proof of “real family”

Future outlook: more longitudinal, comparative, multi-sided and mixed-methods research – and more attention to family networks beyond parent-child dyads.

What does this mean COFACE and civil society?

SEE THE WHOLE FAMILY NETWORK

Ask who gives and receives care across borders – including grandparents, siblings, caregivers and family members who cannot move

SUPPORT CARE ACROSS BORDERS

Connect legal, psychosocial, school, digital and practical support. Include the carers and family members who remain elsewhere

CHALLENGE POLICY MADE SEPARATION

Document how reunification rules, status, detention, waiting times, documentation and welfare disrupt care and wellbeing

TURN CASES INTO COLLECTIVE EVIDENCE

Compare experiences across countries and organizations to identify recurring structural barriers – not just individual “problems”

Final take away

Distance does not dissolve a family. But policy and institutions can either enable or obstruct the care that keeps a family together

- Unwanted separations and uncertainties have the biggest impact on wellbeing in transnational families
- Actors in transnational families are not equal – depends on gender, socio-economic status, age, documentation
- Care circulation is part of the life course, it only becomes problematic when care is restrained
- In the life course care needs change, and the importance of transnational actors should not be forgotten. E.g. a grandparent coming to help with newborns

Questions to think about:

- Where do services and policies still assume that “family” means a co-resident nuclear household?
- Which actors in transnational families are the hardest to reach or support?
- How do the increasing restrictive migration policies in Europe condition transnational family life?

Q&A



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Bas Niemans Photography - TCRA project