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How are the children faring?

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A young Vietnamese girl attempting to draw a picture of her family as part of the CHAMPSEA study. We are grateful to the participants of CHAMPSEA and the Wellcome Trust, UK, for funding the project [GR079946/B/06/Z], [GR079946/Z/06/Z].

Asia as the continent is a major supplier of migrant workers internationally. Says Professor Brenda Yeoh, the Principal Investigator of this project, "The last two decades have seen the feminisation of migration in South-East Asia with increasing numbers of women heading abroad as domestic workers and healthcare workers to meet the care deficit in developed countries. This is resulting in a major social shift in the South-East Asian family, the basic building block of society."

Prof Yeoh wears many hats. Apart from leading the research cluster on Asian Migrations at ARI, she is also concurrently the Dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and teaches social and historical geography at the Department of Geography at NUS.

Prof Yeoh explains that Asia's distinctive migration regime sees labourers migrate without their families. As more women from the developing world take up roles as caregivers in the developed world, a global care chain is set in motion. Simply put, while these women look after others' families in host countries, who is looking after their kids? This project focuses on the southern end of the global care chain, which has been mostly overlooked till date, to see how source countries deal with care arrangements for left-behind children to accommodate the absence of parents, especially mothers.

Prof Yeoh and her team of researchers in the four countries collected information from a thousand such households in each country through questionnaires administered to three family members – the primary caregiver (in the absence of the mother), the head of the household and the child. It was a mammoth task, which has yielded many interesting insights. The questionnaire survey is complemented by qualitative methods involving in-depth interviews with caregivers and children in the four South-East Asian countries.

So how are these children coping? Surprisingly well, as the research finds, contradicting the usual doom-and-gloom views that are often expressed in the media about rising delinquency and broken families. "The good news is that the Asian family structure is a resilient one," says Prof Yeoh. "In the mother's absence, other caregivers – an aunt or grandmother - step in. The fathers, too, are not as hopeless as one thinks and they play a part in child-rearing with the help of a larger web of care. Plus, these kids often have access to better schooling and nutrition. The mothers, too, are not entirely absent as they call home and practise long-

What does a family without the mother look like? Ask Angin, an Indonesian child, whose parents migrated to Saudi Arabia to work when he was two months old. Angin, who was left in the care of an aunt, is one of the many children whose wellbeing is the focus of a comprehensive study conducted by the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Asia Research Institute (ARI).

Supported by a generous gift from the Wellcome Trust, the 'Children Health And Migrant Parents in South-East Asia' or CHAMPSEA project comprised a rigorous quantitative and qualitative study of the left-behind children of migrant mothers and fathers in four countries – Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The Wellcome Trust is a global charitable foundation that supports research that helps improve human and animal health.

There are tens of millions of such children worldwide, with a significant portion of them in

distance parenting.”

Prof Yeoh hopes that this project will increase awareness of what is a very pertinent issue of our time by offering in-depth, concrete information. “This project is cutting edge because of the rigorous methodologies used. It is the first of its kind in terms of its scope, involving comparative analysis across four South-East Asian countries. We are extremely grateful to the Wellcome Trust because their sizeable gift allowed us to effectively combine quantitative and qualitative methods – these result in the most rigorous and rich analysis – and also to work with partners across the four countries.”

She adds, “This topic is extremely complex. While working overseas empowers women, this also comes at a cost. Through this research, we hope to have created a balanced picture supported by evidence that will allow for sensitive policy intervention.”

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For more information on this topic, see http://www.populationasia.org/CHAMPSEA/publications_champsea.htm

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