

**EXPLORING BEYOND SOCIAL SERVICES  
ADDRESSED TO ROMANIAN CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND**

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**Abstract**

The child left behind (CLB) can feel the parents' migration as abandonment (Antman, 2013; Zhou, Murphy, Tao, 2014); in this case, the national legislation (Law 272/2004 and HG 691/2015) provides an institutional mechanism that supports these children, and indirectly their families. We claim to explore the way field practice takes place by talking with social workers from public social assistance services. Three focus groups with 30 participants were organized and the group discussions revealed difficulties in the application of the law determined by cultural factors, the wrong representation of the role of PSAS<sup>1</sup> in the community or misinformation. Five thematic units were outlined: a) low level of registration of parents who migrate, b) poor representation of PSAS in the community, c) the effectiveness of the interventions, d) the institutional mechanism, e) the condition of the children left behind. Implications for practice were discussed.

**Key words:** *children left behind, social workers, institutional mechanism.*

**1. Introduction**

Bryant (2007) catalogues the children left behind, along with migrant children and interracial children, as children affected by migration. Although most studies on migration focus on the disadvantages of parental migration, there are numerous studies that show that there is also an

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<sup>1</sup> PSAS: Public Social Assistance Service. services organized in the local public administration, in the immediate proximity of the citizen. The main responsibility: the application of social policies in order to prevent abandonment, marginalization and social exclusion

improvement in family life when the parent migrates (Dreby, 2007; Stevens și Vollebergh, 2008; Jordan, Graham, 2012).

It is widely assumed that migration and migration-related processes significantly affect the mental health of people (both adults and their children) (Aronowitz, 1984; Barrett, Moore, Sonderegger, 2000). Children left behind can feel their parents' migration as a form of rejection, even abandonment, resulting in mental disorders and low well-being, anxiety, sick, (Botezat, Pfeiffer, 2014), depression (Hu et al. 2018), behavioural problems, abuse of psychoactive substances, mental health problems (Xu et al., 2022). These children are subject to a multitude of risks: their vulnerability comes from the risks of abuse, neglect, abandonment, low self-esteem, depression (Bakker, 2009). However, Battistella, Conaco, (1998) believes that the parent's migration itself causes psychological damage if the family in whose care the child remains does not counteract the effects of the absence of parents.

Sun et al. 2015 understands that the situation of the child left behind is a challenge at the institutional level, and educators and parents are the first ones responsible, that must identify solutions to cover the needs of the children left behind. Too many CLBs (Bradbury et al. 2015) in a country without armed conflicts or serious economic or security problems; and yet, 86,263 children have one or both parents working abroad. Migration embraced by so many people and families has become a social phenomenon and ultimately a social problem of a society that has not identified the solution to keep its citizens in the country. CLB are associated with poor academic results (Dee, Jacob, 2011), educationally disadvantaged, susceptible to developing psychosocial problems (Tang et al, 2018).

There is a very rich academic literature on the subject of CLB, particularly focused on the impact of parental separation on the child's well-being. There are few studies about the types of services addressed to these children, or about the institutional mechanisms that make it possible to provide integrated services for these children. In any case, the anti-exclusion policies are focused on ensuring the access of these children to education, health and social services, a first condition in protecting their well-being being the appointment of a legal guardian/representative.

Regarding the needs of the child left behind, the Romanian Legislation (HG 691/2015) makes the following provisions: the need to strengthen the relationship with the migration parent/parents; the need of the parent who takes care of the child to be informed on parenting topics; the need to monitor the child's well-being (in the family and at school) by organizing regular meetings with the family, specific needs by ensuring counselling. The institutions with

attributions in this sense are PSAS and school institutions. They can be involved in the social and educational assistance process of the child, CCREA<sup>2</sup> or GDSACP<sup>3</sup>. Darling-Hammond (2007) finds that there is more evaluation than intervention in the case of CLB. The author shows that the social inequality experienced by these children is not addressed realistically in school, and is not preceded by sustainable social services. Criticisms brought to the No Children Left Behind (NCLB) project have in mind the flawed strategies to improve the inclusion of these children through threats and sanctions rather than through significant investments in education and infrastructure.

## **2. Problem Statement and Research Methodology**

The study involved a field investigation carried out in Arad, between October 2022 and February 2023, which involved the organization of three focus groups of ten participants each. The study is qualitative and aims to evaluate the perception of social workers regarding the problem of children with parents who have gone to work abroad. The method used was the group interview, i.e. the Focus Group (Bailey, 1994, Morgan, 1996, Marshall & Rossman, 2006) which allowed the collection of data and the generation of new ideas as a result of the group's dynamics (Hill, Thompson, Williams, 1997; Brink, 1993). The "content analysis" technique was used to analyse the data. We sought to identify the thematic units that were distinguished with quite high accuracy and to analyse their content (Mayring, 2000).

Therefore, the present paper focuses on answering the following questions:

What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the work with children left behind?

What are the most important aspects of their professional practices in working with children left behind?

## **3. Participants**

The participants were chosen using the purposive sampling method recommended in studies with a small number of individuals whose purpose is to evaluate perceptions, problems or the description of some social context. They were informed about the purpose of organizing the group discussions and they unanimously agreed.

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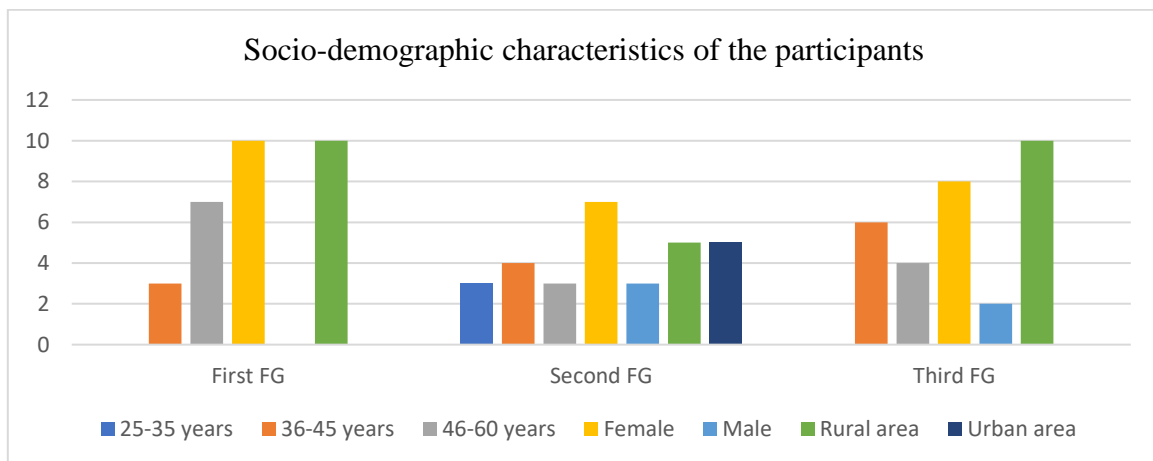
<sup>2</sup> CCREA. County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance.

Service organized at the county level, purpose: monitoring special educational needs and providing specialists in the direction of ensuring access to education and preventing school dropouts

<sup>3</sup> GDSACP: General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection

The participants in the group discussions were the social workers, the RCP<sup>4</sup> from the public services gives social assistance from the local public administrations who responded to our invitation. 25 of them work in the urban environment and 5 of them in DSA<sup>5</sup> in the urban environment.

**Figure nr.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants**



#### 4. Findings

In this study social workers' perceptions of their work with CLB were evaluated and a number of results were obtained. Asked to express their perceptions regarding CLB, the participants used the terms *trauma, suffering, early maturation, abandonment*. It was interesting that they answered from the child's perspective, not from their perspective as professionals. The social workers did not initially refer to the difficulties or dysfunctions existing in practice with these children, but took a different position, once again showing a very high level of empathy. As expected, the evaluations of their work were made according to the efficiency criterion, that is: in what way do our interventions reach the child's needs?

##### 4.1. Low level of registration of parents who migrate

The participants raised this topic and unanimously appreciated that this fact represents the source of many difficulties in the subsequent monitoring of the cases. Why don't they notify the parents, as the law requires? Because they don't know that they have this obligation, because

<sup>4</sup> RCP: Responsible Case Prevention. name given to the social worker at the local level with attributions in the prevention of abandonment

<sup>5</sup> DSA: Directorate of Social Assistance

they don't want to (they feel threatened, they feel in the sights of the services, and they don't understand why their intervention would be necessary).

*I wouldn't leave my child. Do you want to take it from me?*

The group discussions showed that there are two categories of parents:

- The first category, those who do not know the law and are not informed about the steps they must go through before departure. One of the most important steps is the delegation of parental authority over the main caregiver of the minor.
- The second category includes parents who know the law, know their obligations and still do not declare their departure out of "fear", the fear of losing certain incomes from the country. Thus, a significant part chooses to migrate unregulated, without a work contract. Because of this, a clear number of migrants cannot be established

As a result of this fact, the social workers are in a rush to get this information from the school the kid goes to. This task could be possible in the rural environment where proximity and social distance is small. In the urban environment, this category of children still remains invisible if the parents have not declared the decision to leave. On the other hand, the information circuit should start from the parent to the PSAS-School. After which a functional partnership would be built. However, the respondents note that neither the teachers nor the principals are notified of the departure of the parent or parents, moreover some try to hide this truth. Moreover, the participants' perception is that the social dimension is not systematically addressed in the school, except depending on the teacher's affinity or sensitivity towards certain categories of children at risk.

#### **4.2. Poor perception of SPAS in the community**

According to the group discussions, there are two quite clearly outlined reactions regarding the SPAS intervention in the child's family when one or both parents have gone to work. Roma communities have a greater receptivity to social services in the context of the emigrant parent; the fact may be due to their more frequent dialogue with the social services, they being included in a vulnerable social category (Rat, 2005). In the case of the majority population, it is possible to operate the stereotypes related to the vulnerable category of the beneficiaries of social services. The label "*poor*" or "*needy*" distances some families from the prospect of accepting a social service, refusing it vehemently. Social workers indicate that they are often perceived as "*badly intentioned*"; frequently they are not received at home, the truth about the situation of their parents' departure is hidden from them. Often the parent left alone with the child feels

threatened by the social worker and adopts a defensive attitude. Rigorous information is necessary in which they appeal to the regulations of the law so that the family accepts the CPR intervention.

#### **4.3.The effectiveness of the interventions**

This topic has been outlined accurately and is in fact the main concern of the respondents. PSAS contact with the child is relatively superficial, and the reasons would be:

- The perception of parents who feel threatened by CPR is the most important obstacle. He often does not signal his departure, on the grounds that it is a private matter that does not concern anyone outside the family.
- Reserve for the family of the child left behind to be in contact with PSAS. It is considered that the departure of the parent does not put them in a vulnerable position, that there is no valid reason for a state institution to "invade" their family space.

*"Most families perceive our intervention as intrusive. This is a reason why our activity cannot take place in optimal conditions".*

*"They feel ashamed to visit. In the countryside, the reply still works: what will the neighbours say about this? We do not ask for help from the state".*

The overcrowding of social workers with cases and because of this the impossibility of allocating a consistent time for counselling.

According to the regulations of the law, the social worker performs a risk assessment on the following dimensions: living conditions, health, family relationships, friend group, economic situation, and once these risks are identified, multidisciplinary intervention is requested (psychologist, school counsellor, doctor). GD 691/2015 provides a lot of resources to support the family that will benefit from the Service Plan if the identified risks require it.

In reality, all kinds of difficulties arise: the lack of a psychologist to turn to, the lack of the school counsellor, the unavailability of most families to cooperate.

#### **4.4.The institutional mechanism**

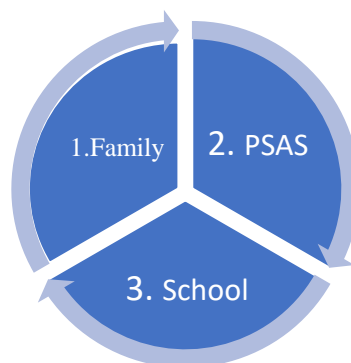
The triggering of the institutional mechanism begins with the declaration that the parent who is going to leave the country for gainful purposes has the responsibility to make at the PSAS headquarters, according to law 272/2004, art. 104 para. (1). where it specifies that *"The parent who exercises parental authority alone or with whom the child lives, who is going to go to work*

*abroad, has the obligation to notify this intention to the public social assistance service at home, at least 40 days before leaving the country."*

Law 272, art 106 stipulates that local public administration authorities initiate information campaigns for parents in order to make parents aware of the risks assumed by going to work abroad and to inform parents about their obligations in the situation in which they intend to move abroad. However, these campaigns happen ad hoc, informally, "by word of mouth".

Law No 272/2004<sup>6</sup> and GD No 691/2015<sup>7</sup> make logical and coherent provisions, but there is no personnel infrastructure necessary for their application. "In the situation where, following the evaluation, it is discovered that there are suspicions of affecting the child's emotional state, the representative of the public social assistance service requests the support of a psychologist, in order to include him in a psychological counselling program. In rural areas, school counsellors and psychologists are often missing, in these conditions they can be delegated by GDSACP or CCREA. The family, the school and the community constitute three milestones in the training and development of the child. A real partnership between the three courts builds a wall of protection and security for the child for the simple fact that they represent the three environments in which the child moves. All follow to achieve the child's well-being and influence each other, having the potential to maximize the child's prospects of success (Epstein, Sanders, 2002).

Figure no.1. *The circuit of information regarding the migration of the parents*



The participants in the study are believe that the family-school partnership is already deficient, that many of the families at social risk do not communicate with the school, or precisely these families are registered in the records of the social services. In the rural environment, identifying

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<sup>6</sup> Law No 272/2004: The law on the protection and promotion of children's rights

<sup>7</sup> GD No 691/2015: Procedures for monitoring the growth and care of the child left behind

the families in question is possible and somewhat easy; in the urban environment, however, this subject remains uncovered.

#### **4.5.The condition of the children left behind**

Compared to other categories of children in difficulty, CLB, they experience a situation in which they experience familiarity in their daily life, and at the same time, they experience the painful separation from one or both parents ( Jordan, Graham, 2012). Of course, the condition or well-being of these children varies depending on many variables. However, the social workers point out some important conditions that shape the well-being of the child left behind: care by another parent or a foreign person, age, level of poverty prior to departure and previous information/preparation for this event. After leaving, maintaining the relationship with the departed parent(s) is fundamental. In rural areas, in families where there were big shortages, the father's departure is associated with perspective, with chances. The child is frequently motivated to learn, is encouraged to evolve, the event of the parent's departure triggers the family's immune system, activates resilience and cohesion. Antman, (2012) suggests that indeed, parents' migration does not have precise and proven effects on children.

But the child aggressively experiences any challenge to talk about what he feels. A very rich literature talks about the father's departure without notice. From the accounts of the participants, we deduce that they encountered fewer such cases; the age at which the parent migrates is a key factor. The younger the child, the greater the impact. Adolescents supervised by their grandparents, another topic brought up for discussion, can slip into deviant behaviour or vice versa, having the financial support of their parents, they make great efforts to align themselves or fulfil the family project, that of succeeding.

#### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The group discussions on the topic of children left behind revealed some realities of the practice in our country, which must be taken into account. First of all, the intervention of the social worker is compromised by the boundary that the family sets, which perceives this intervention as intrusive. There are cultural considerations that limit the intervention of the social worker in the life of CLB. I deduced from the group discussions that the family space is perceived as poorly permeable by its members, which is actually a characteristic of the primary group. The increased permeability of ethnic families is probably greater due to their more frequent contact with social services. This fact denotes the good relationship perceived by the



beneficiaries with public social assistance services. The unavailability of the parents to declare their migration involuntarily places the children in an unsafe environment or impossible to approach by the social services. Therefore, children remain invisible, outside of any form of support. This is the reason why the social workers participating in the group interview confirmed that their interventions are not always effective.

The condition of CLB cannot be generalized, it mainly depends on family process variables that can serve as protective or risk factors. The conclusion is also confirmed by the studies of (Harker, 2001) and (Suarez-Orozco & Qin, 2006).

Although the legal framework is coherent and logical, impediments of a cultural nature hinder the optimal development of specific interventions. It is recommended to inform the community about the role of PSAS in the community and in preventing marginalization, strengthening the school-family-community partnership. It is also necessary to sensitize teaching staff regarding the effects of the parent's departure on the child, and therefore on his vulnerability (Epstein, Sanders, 2002). It is also necessary to include parents in information sessions and raise awareness of the effects that their absence, even temporary, has on the child. It is also recommended to create a network of psychologists, school counsellors, psychotherapists who can be accessed or can constantly provide services in the rural environment.

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