



# **‘Voices’ of left behind children in Tajikistan**

Shukriya Nazridod

Erasmus Mundus Master’s Programme in Social Work with Families and Children

Supervisors

Dr. Cláudia Pereira

Dr. Maria das Dores Guerreiro

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,

June 12, 2017



## **Abstract**

### **‘Voices’ of left behind children in Tajikistan**

**Author: Shukriya Nazridod**

**Key words:** Migration, left behind children, child-centred approach, feelings, understandings, coping strategies

Tajikistan’s economy is highly dependent on the remittances sent home by migrant workers, making it the top recipient in the world with a contribution to GDP of 50 percent. The continuity of labour migration, mostly to the Russian Federation, raises important questions and concerns about the general wellbeing of the left behind children. Children left behind are worthy of study in their own right, because they are often the most affected due to their relative immaturity and lack of social power in Tajik society. Using a child-centred ethnography, these children had an opportunity to express their feelings and understanding and to help us see the many ways they experience their parental absence and their lives with the extended family. Being left behind in Tajikistan has become ‘naturalized’, as a result, the hardships faced by the children are not seen. The results revealed that these experiences are influenced by the gender of the child. If girls were more open to expressing their feelings to me, boys, on the other hand, are influenced by traditional and stereotypical views on masculinity and expressing feelings is not ‘manly’. Girls' are subject to excessive amounts of household chores as well as taking care of other children in the household. The findings of my research further show that children experience abuse of various forms, withdrawal, insecurity and loneliness. Yet, they also showed the potential for resilience in the face of adversity using many ways to cope with their situations like crying to feel better, seeing school as a safer space than home, social networking and spending time with friends/neighbours.

## **Acknowledgement**

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Cláudia Pereira for her support, love, guidance, invaluable assistance and her belief in my work. You have been a great mentor for me.

My special thanks goes to my second supervisor, Dr. Maria das Dores Guerreiro for keeping my spirit up and guiding me throughout writing this thesis.

I want to express my very profound gratitude to my friend, Ian Pinchen for helping me in all the steps of writing this thesis and believing in my work. You have helped me immensely.

I would also like to thank Mary Allan and Staffan Larsson, whose support, love and care never felt missing and for accepting nothing but excellence from me.

My deepest appreciation to all the professors who shared their knowledge and wisdom with us throughout this master's programme.

Last but not the least, many thanks go to the children who trusted me and took part in my research. This work is devoted to those children, who are left behind and who are unable to speak for themselves.

# 1. Introduction

“People have been on the move since human life began. Migration is neither a new phenomenon, a failure of development, nor a substitute for development”

(Department for International Development, 2007, p.1)

## 1.1. Background of the study

In the small town of Khorog, Tajikistan where I was born and grew up, I have witnessed members of my own extended family deciding to leave for labour migration to Russia. I have also seen my neighbors and relatives of the people I knew, migrating and leaving small children to grow up within their extended family. I was young at that time and could not imagine my parents being far away; nor could I understand how parents decided to leave their children behind. Since that moment, my interest became rooted in migration and especially in understanding the lives of children growing up within their extended family.

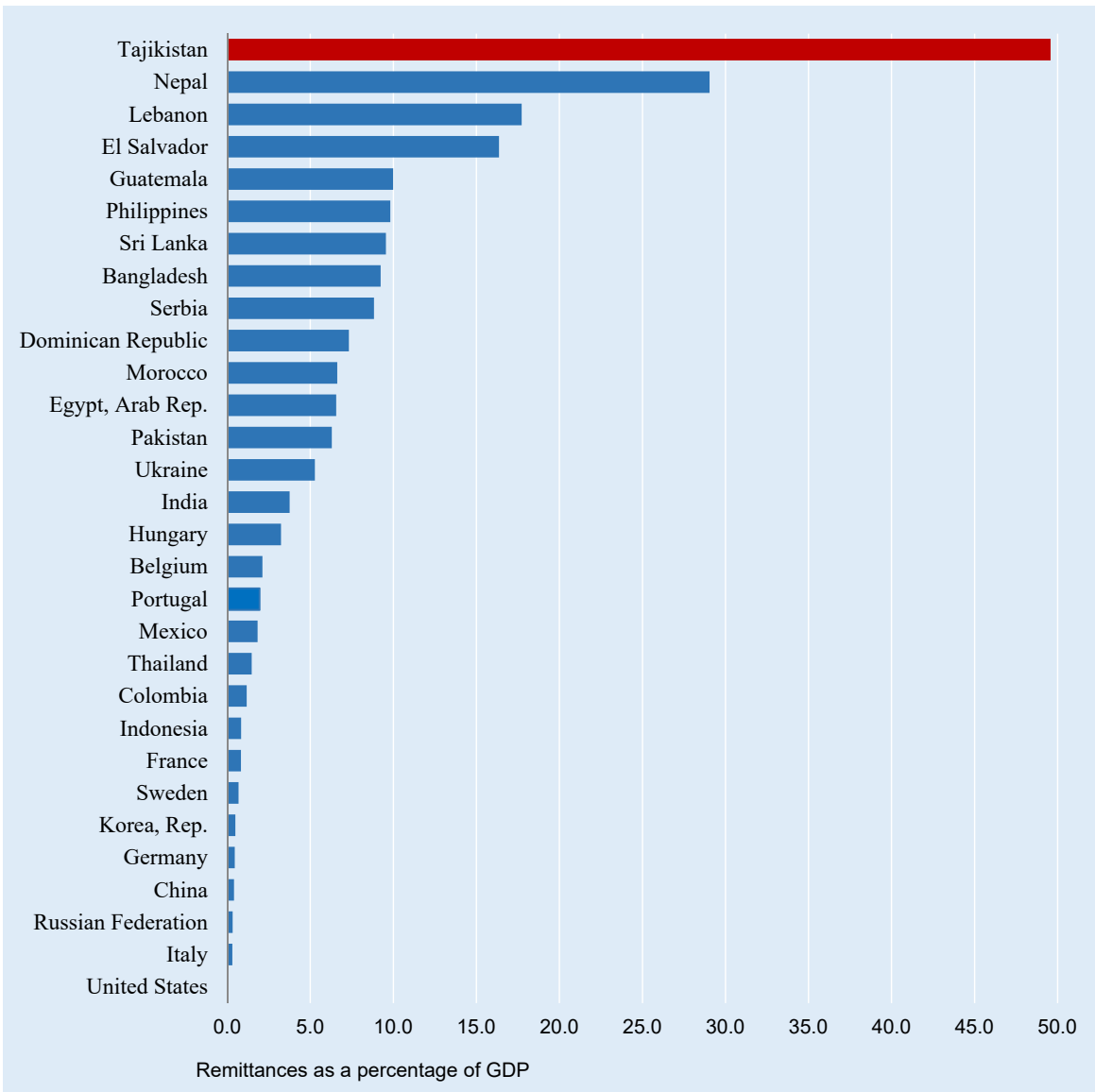
During my bachelor’s degree, I decided to take the step of writing my thesis on the effects of parental migration on the wellbeing of those children left behind. In that research, I interviewed children and their caregivers, and local informants including teachers, members of NGOs, family doctors and conducted focus group discussion with the children. I was also lucky to spend one night in the households of the two children, to observe the environment and atmosphere the child was growing up in. The results were revealing; the children were being raised in a hostile environment, where various forms of abuse were being carried out. I concluded that the prolonged absence of parents due to labour migration has a negative effect on the socio-psychological wellbeing of the children. I continued this research further for my Master’s and specified my focus on their voices, meaning, their own understandings and feelings in relation to being left behind, an important aspect that has been largely ignored in the migration discipline.

## 1.2. Importance of the research

Children are most affected by migration due to their vulnerability and low status within the community, especially in poor countries with hierarchical, patriarchal systems like Tajikistan. It is striking that so little research is available about this category of children in Tajikistan, since it is the top country for labour migration in the world with 50% of the country’s GDP comprised from the remittances by migrants (Chart 1). This means, thousands of children are being raised by members of the extended family other than their parents. Secondly, the question arises as to why the government of Tajikistan has not made any provision to tackle this issue and take action, especially if children are exposed to maltreatment. This current research study is thus of great importance because, using a child-centered approach, it firstly gives left behind children an

opportunity to express themselves and explain their lives from their perspectives. Such an approach is rarely used when learning about children, especially in the context of migration. Secondly, it acknowledges and records the understanding and feelings of the children who are left behind by parental migration, an important dimension of today’s society in Tajikistan. Thirdly, the findings are important for the central and local government of the country to build better social responses and policies. Moreover, the results may foster more research on how low cost, self-help services might be a way of supporting these young people.

**Chart 1. Top remittance-receiving countries, economic weight, 2013**



**Source:** Chart by Observatório da Emigração, (Pires, et al., 2015), data from the World Bank, World DataBank, World Development Indicators, Economic Policy & Debt Series (my highlight).

## 1.3 Context of Tajikistan and Migration

In today's globalized world, people are now more aware of the possibilities and opportunities for them to find a better job, studies, life elsewhere and it has become easier for them to travel. Globalization is increasing the demand for cheap and skilled, for flexible and permanent labour, especially in developed and richer countries. Migration helps poor people and their families have an extra source of income in the household, increases their social status and improves their quality of life. It further contributes to the economic betterment of the developing countries and improves trade and economic investments from abroad (Department for International Development, 2007). When people migrate, they do so for different reasons over varying distances and periods of time. The process of migration is political, economic and social, having tremendous effects on the people who decide to move, the places where these people decide to go and on the individuals who are left behind and (ibid.).

When people migrate, the consequences of their move creates a category of left behind population which are comprised mostly of women, elderly people and children. Thus, migration alters the structure of the family. Children are most effected by migration due to their vulnerability and status within the community, especially in poor countries with patriarchal system. Researchers show that there are many ways migration influences the child: they may benefit from the remittances sent by their parents, which increase consumption, schooling and access to health. At the same time this benefit depends on the child's sex, age, and the context where the he/she is being brought up.

The processes of migration in Tajikistan are traced and followed by the intricate history of the country and the huge economic and social changes seen in recent years. After the collapse of the USSR and following the Civil war (1992-1997), Tajikistan faced an agonizing transition to a free market economy that made the lives of the people even harsher, as there was a sharp decline in production across all sectors. Whilst the economy of the country fell apart and many people lost their jobs, for most of the Tajik population finding a job abroad was the only alternative choice to going hungry (Olimova and Bosc, 2003). Labour migration became an important tool as a means of solving the problem of unemployment.

In economic terms, money sent home by the migrants In Tajikistan brings huge contributions to the economic development and have an influence on poverty reduction (Livingstone, 2012). As seen from Chart 1, Tajikistan is the top country in the world with 50% of the country's GDP comprised from the remittances by migrants. This means that remittances are one of the main financial resource that meet the needs of the Tajik household members. This level of mass migration from the country does not only effect the economy of the country, but also impacts the social, political and demographic spheres (Catrinescu, et al., 2011).

A research conducted by UNICEF (Catrinescu, et al., 2011) shows that families with children are more likely to have a migrant member, usually one parent or both parents being away. Therefore, one has to acknowledge the fact that there is a whole generation of children growing up without the presence of their parents. Yet, few researches focused on understanding the impact of parental labour migration on the wellbeing of left behind children in Tajikistan. Still this research innovates in exploring the understandings and feelings of these children as experienced by them. To this aim, I used a child-focused approach to give the opportunity for the children to voice themselves and for us, to explore the situation from their perspective. My study will focus on the following main research question, and sub research questions.

## 1.4 Research Questions

I base my research on Articles 12 and 13 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which highlight the importance of listening to children and respecting their experiences and voices. As O’Kane (2000, p. 136 as cited in Nutbrown, 2011) puts it, this: “in part reflects a move away from seeing children as passive recipients of adult socialization, to a recognition that children are social actors in their own right”. What is meant by voices is to ensure that children’s views, as participants, are identified and honestly portrayed, telling how they see it, rather than how we (researchers) see it (Hill, 2006; James & Prout, 1997; Komulainen, 2007; Nutbrown, 2011; (Young et al., 2014). The main research question is:

**What are the understandings and feelings of children being left-behind by parental migration?**

Related to the main topic, the sub-research questions are:

- How do children explain the changes occasioned by parental visits? And what has remained the same?
- What hardships, pains and also joys and achievements can be examined in their voices?
- What are the coping strategies used by children?
- What are the gender differences and similarities in children's experiences?

## 1.5 Findings

I employed qualitative research methods using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, diaries and participant observation for data collection. This allowed the children to explain their own perceptions and experiences, from their own point of view.

Parental absence in Tajikistan creates disruption, changes in care giving arrangements and family dynamics, displacement and insecurity, isolation, depression and problems of attachment in children. At the same time these young children find ways to cope with the obstacle and difficulties they face. By giving coherence to their situation, they try to attach more positive feelings towards

the migration of their parents. Furthermore, the experiences vary between the girls and the boys. In Tajikistan, girls routinely experience more rigid control over their lives than males do. They are forced to be engaged in an excessive amount of household chores as well as taking care of other children in the household. The boys are influenced by traditional and stereotypical views on masculinity that limit them in expressing their feelings.

Being left behind is something that has become normalized in Tajikistan. Therefore, almost no one talks about it, or how it can influence children and the whole community in general. I have realized also that my conversation with the children, asking them about their feelings and understandings, about their dreams and hobbies reminded them that they are still children. One may also conclude that they are being “adults” too early, since they are still children.

This study presents the analytical framework, methodology, findings, analysis, conclusion and policy recommendations of my research conducted in Tajikistan on understanding the effect of parental migration on the lives of children who are left behind.

## 2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

In this chapter, I will start by describing the main concepts used within the paper (section 2.1). Furthermore, I will contextualize Tajik’s emigration, by explaining the emergence of Tajikistan as a new country after the collapse of the Soviet Union (section 2.2.1), its drift into a civil war (1992-1997) after less than a year of independence (section 2.2.2) and how migration became an alternative way to fight poverty and unemployment (section 2.2.3). Section 2.3 explores research studies that have been conducted in Tajikistan on children left behind by migration and examines what their main findings are. Section 2.4 focuses on literature from other countries, analyzing the effects of parental migration on left behind children and how these children explain their own experiences; and finally, in section 2.5 I elucidate the theoretical framework based on child-centered paradigm.



## 2.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 12 and 13

The UNCRC (1989), ratified by Tajikistan in 1993, acknowledges the obligations of any state towards the wellbeing of every child. The UNCRC defines children as “children below the age of 18” (Catrinescu et al., 2011, p.9) and places high priority on the rights of a child; it promotes the attainment of good health and education, the right to be free from exploitation, abuse and discrimination and the right to be heard and respected (ibid.). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is ratified almost by all countries except the United States and Somalia, provides universal consensus on agreed norms and premises for a child’s full development (Base & Larson, 1994 as cited in Boyden, 1997). Moreover, it recognizes the child’s capacity to act independently and upholds his/her right to freedom of expression and association (Cantwell, 1989 as cited in ibid.). The notion that equality of opportunity is humane and should exist for all children in the world is indeed very appealing, especially since so many children experience exploitation and are maltreated.

However, studies in sociology, social anthropology and cultural studies suggest that, childhood is a social construct which emerges in different forms (James & Prout, 1997). Therefore, when we talk about the conception of rights, we must not ignore the link between child rights and cultural values and the outlook of any society on childhood and childrearing. In this sense, UNCRC, which sets out children’s rights in detail (Lejeune 1984 as cited in Boyden, 1999) can only be applied “to a geo-political area in which the same attitudes to law, the same political system and compatible cultural traditions are firmly rooted” (p.199). That said, even if Tajikistan has ratified the convention, this does not mean that the rights and welfare of the child are being upheld, since within the hierarchy of the Tajik family and community, the children’s position is the lowest. Migration can affect children in different ways and one category is those left behind by either one or both parents who have migrated. These were the main criteria for this study.

When conducting the research, the age and gender of the child was taken into consideration. These two characteristics are of much relevance. Older children were easier to talk with considering the sensitivity of the topic itself. Gender on the other hand, helped to identify differences in experiences. For example, the education of males can take precedence over that of females and the female is more likely to be involved in helping around the house.

I base my research on Articles 12 and 13 of UNCRC, that highlight the importance of listening to children and respecting their experiences and voices. As O’Kane (2000, p. 136 as cited in Nutbrown, 2011) puts it, this: “in part reflects a move away from seeing children as passive recipients of adult socialization, to a recognition that children are social actors in their own right”. What is meant by voices is to ensure that children’s views, as participants, are identified and honestly portrayed, telling how they see it, rather than how we (researchers) see it (Hill, 2006; James & Prout, 1997; Komulainen, 2007; Nutbrown, 2011; (Young et al., 2014).

## 2.2 Migration from Tajikistan

### 2.2.1 Post-Soviet transformation

The disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991) provided the newly emerged country of Tajikistan with many challenges, but also a number of opportunities. The transition from a command economy into a market economy fell into the hands of political and administrative cadres who were not well prepared for the drastic changes and responsibilities (Mughal, 2007). And here lies the calamity of the Tajikistan independence (1991), in common with other ex-Soviet countries; the power fell mostly into the hands of the same elite (Nomenklatura) who were part of the administration of the Soviet system (ibid., 2007). This sudden independence negatively influenced trade, financial flows, transport and led to a sharp decline in production across all sectors of the economy (Bennett, Clifford, & Falkingham, 2013) as well as the end of subsidies from the Soviet Union. The transfer of subsidies from Moscow to Tajikistan were over 90% of the Tajik Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Mughal, 2007) - the highest among all the Central Asian countries (see Table 1). The end of the Soviet Union meant the end of these allocations, causing serious debt in the economy and a sharp decline in the income of the country.

**Table 1 Financial Transfers Received by the Central Asian Republics (as % of country GDP) from the Russian Central Bank in 1992**

Ranking	Countries	(%)
1	Tajikistan	90.7
2	Uzbekistan	69.9
3	Turkmenistan	53.3
4	Kyrgyz Republic	22.9
5	Kazakhstan	25.5
6	Latvia	1

**Source:** Mughal, 2007, p. 5, with data both from IMF (1994a) cited by Aslund, 2001, p. 129 and Orłowski (1995, p. 66) cited by Aslund, p.130 (my highlight and ranking).

The labour market in post-Soviet Tajikistan can be explained as follows: decline in the public-sector employment (50% by 2000); disproportionate balance between the existing labour force and the demand for it, a significant increase in the level of unemployment, insecure social protection and a weak welfare system (Olimova & Bosc, 2013). Therefore, unemployment and underemployment are the key factors that push many people to migrate abroad.

## 2.2.2 Devastation of the Civil War and the aftermath

Within less than a year after Tajikistan became independent, a bloody Civil war (1992-1997) exacerbated the decline across all sectors and incapacitated the already fragile infrastructure of the country (Tazmini, 2001; Mughal, 2007). As a result, this landlocked country, with 93 % of the total area covered in mountains (Olimova & Bosc, 2003), suffered a longer and worse decline in GDP in comparison to other transition economies. The civil war resulted in a severe recession and decline in the socio-economic sector, in which the average annual growth of the GDP was negative for a whole decade (Table 2).

**Table 2. Economic decline in Tajikistan in Central Asian and Global Perspective, 1990 - 2001**

Country	Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	
	Average Annual % Growth 1990-2001	Per capita average Annual % Growth 1990-2001
<b>Tajikistan</b>	-8.5	-9.9
Kazakhstan	2.8	1.9

Kyrgyz Republic	-	-
	2.9	3.9
Turkmenistan	-	-
	2.8	6.1
Uzbekistan	0.	-
	4	1.5
World	2.	1.
	7	2
Low income	3.	1.
	4	4
Middle income	3.	2.
	4	2
Low and middle income	3.	1.
	4	8
East Asia and Pacific	7.	6.
	5	2
South Asia	5.	3.
	5	5
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.	0
	6	

**Source:** Mughal, 2007, p.6., data from World Bank, WDR, 2003 (my highlight).

Even now, the country remains amongst the least developed in the world, ranking 127th among 182 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) and 144th in terms of GDP (United Nations Development Programme, 2011).

### 2.2.3 Emigration as an alternative solution

With 93 % of the total area covered in mountains and a sharp decline in all economic sectors across the country caused by the transition to a market economy, and a long civil war, the unemployment rate rapidly increased as the population has grown. For many Tajiks finding a job abroad was the only alternative to fight poverty and hunger (Olimova & Bosc, 2003). Economical and physical insecurity, and low levels of social protection forced thousands to seek jobs outside the country, mainly in the Russian Federation (ibid.). In 2007-2008, about 1,5 million Tajiks left to find work in Russia and Kazakhstan (Crisis Group Asia Report, 2010) and almost every family in Tajikistan had one or more member in migration (IMF, 2005 as cited in Justino & Semyakina, 2009).

Russia has become the Tajik people's preferred country to migrate to work. The reasons lie in the existing ties between the two states, the Tajik communities that already have settled in Russia during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, knowledge of the Russian language (at least the basics, as it is taught in schools) and most importantly, Russia's high demand for cheap labour, especially in the construction sector (International Organization for Migration, 2014).

The first country in the world with three quarters (74%) of the total Tajik emigrants therefore is the Russian Federation. The remaining 26% go mainly to Central Asian countries, Germany and

the United States. The population of Tajikistan is about 8 million. From this 607 802 are emigrants, living abroad. This excludes the number of people, who leave the country for seasonal migration every year.

**Table 3. Main destination Countries of Tajik emigrants, in 2013**

Ranking	Destination country	Number of emigrants
1	Russian Federation	451,778.0
2	Kazakhstan	37,614.0
3	Ukraine	30,954.0
4	Afghanistan	24,658.0
5	Germany	16,297.0
6	Uzbekistan	15,631.0
7	Belarus	5,712.0
8	United States	3,813.0
9	Azerbaijan	3,456.0
10	Moldova	2,677.0
	Total emigrants abroad	607 802

**Source:** Table by Shukriya Nazridod, data from The World Bank (2016): bilateral matrixes of migrants and of remittances (estimates)

A high rate of births further increases the jobs deficit leaving many Tajik people to see migration as the most appealing employment opportunity and they are, in fact, “encouraged to do so by their [Tajikistan] government” (ibid., p. 7). Certainly, remittances play a massive role in the Tajik economy. From 2006-2008 remittances in Tajikistan increased from \$1.4 billion to \$3.3 billion, while the National Bank of Tajikistan boosted its net balance by \$125 million (World Bank, 2009; IFM, 2009, as cited in Crisis Group Asia Report, 2010). The money sent by labour migrants to their left behind families has helped to decrease the poverty rate in Tajikistan during the last decade.

Today, Tajikistan has the highest dependence on remittances sent home by labour migrants of all the countries in the world. As shown in Table 4, half of the country’s total GDP derives from the remittances. The second country in the world is Nepal, where the GDP is 30% dependent on money sent by emigrants, whereas in Tajikistan it is 50%. The numbers clearly indicate the importance of this financial resources for the left behind families, as well as for the economy of the country. Moreover, it highlights the dimension of left behind children in Tajikistan.

**Table 4. Top remittance-receiving countries, economic weight, 2013**

Country	Inward remittance flows, thousand US dollars	GDP, thousand US dollars	Remittances as a percentage of GDP
<b>Total world remittance flows</b>	<b>478,460,675</b>	<b>72,908,414,851</b>	<b>0.7</b>
<b>Top remittance-receiving countries</b>			
<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>4,218,769</b>	<b>8,506,615</b>	<b>49.6</b>
Nepal	5,588,903	19,244,245	29.0
Lebanon	7,863,564	44,352,418	17.7
El Salvador	3,971,079	24,259,100	16.4
Guatemala	5,379,067	53,851,153	10.0
Philippines	26,716,840	272,066,652	9.8
Sri Lanka	6,422,187	67,206,129	9.6
Bangladesh	13,857,128	149,990,451	9.2
Serbia	4,022,603	45,519,651	8.8
Dominican Republic	4,485,500	61,198,259	7.3
Morocco	6,881,700	103,914,824	6.6
Egypt, Arab Rep.	17,833,100	271,972,823	6.6
Pakistan	14,629,000	232,286,781	6.3
Ukraine	9,667,000	183,310,146	5.3
India	69,970,361	1,861,801,615	3.8
Hungary	4,325,360	133,423,899	3.2
Belgium	11,131,330	524,778,838	2.1
Portugal	4,372,366	224,912,481	1.9
Mexico	23,022,470	1,262,248,826	1.8
Thailand	5,689,777	387,252,584	1.5
Colombia	4,449,832	380,063,456	1.2
Indonesia	7,614,419	910,478,729	0.8
France	23,336,429	2,810,249,216	0.8
Sweden	3,959,961	579,526,009	0.7
Korea, Rep.	6,455,400	1,305,604,961	0.5
Germany	16,984,001	3,730,260,571	0.5
China	38,818,824	9,490,602,600	0.4
Russian Federation	6,750,810	2,079,024,783	0.3
Italy	6,651,989	2,136,948,256	0.3
United States	6,695,000	16,768,053,000	0.0

**Source:** Table by Pires, et al., (Observatório da Emigração). (2015) data from The World Bank, World DataBank, World Development Indicators, Economic Policy & Debt Series (my highlight).

<http://observatorioemigracao.pt/np4/4924.html>

As we can see from the table below, the growth of the country’s GDP has been increasing since 2001. This growth in the GDP is related to the amount of money sent by labour migrants to their left behind families.

**Table 5. GDP Growth (annual %), 1991, 2001, 2011, 2015**

Country	1991	2001	2011	2015
Kyrgyz Republic	-7.9	5.3	6.0	3.5
Tajikistan	-7.1	10.2	7.4	6.0
Turkmenistan	-4.6	4.3	14.7	6.5
Uzbekistan	-0.5	4.2	8.3	8.0
World	1.4	2.0	3.1	2.7
Low income	0.4	4.6	5.7	4.4
Middle income	1.1	3.5	6.0	3.8

**Source:** Table by Shukriya Nazridod, data from The World Bank  
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2015&locations=TJ-KZ-KG-TM-UZ-1W-XO-XM&start=1991&view=chart>

However, despite the benefits of having an additional financial source in the household, research conducted by UNICEF (Catrinescu, et al., 2011) showed that a significant number of migrant families are unhappy about the choice, with 30 % describing the impact as neutral and 33% negative. The most substantial effects found by the research were lack of parental guidance and impact on children’s depression and aggressiveness (ibid.). At the same time, when migrants were asked about the negative effects of their absence in the household, 36% expressed the view that the lack of control over their children is the downside of their migration (Olimova & Bosc, 2003).

## 2.3 Portrayal of the split family in Tajikistan: social costs and benefits of parental migration on left behind children

Research into migration in developing countries has been particularly concerned about the effects of migration on the economies, the agricultural and non-agricultural developments made possible through the contribution of remittances (Jingzhong, 2011). In Tajikistan, in spite of the fact that it is one of the top remittance recipients and has the largest and most dynamic migratory flow (Olimova & Bosc, 2003) in Central Asia, migrants in most of the cases are not able to move their family members with them. Today, labour migration plays a huge role in the lives of people in this mountainous country. The actual number of labour migrants abroad is hard to measure, but it is estimated that around 608 thousand citizens of Tajikistan were abroad in 2013 as shown in Table 3 (The World Bank, 2016). This leads to the phenomenon of ‘left behind households’ which are comprised mostly of women, elderly and children. However, left behind children are the most vulnerable category in this context and there is an inadequate amount of literature that studies this

phenomenon, particularly in relation to the understanding of the feelings and perceptions attached to it.

Based on the literature currently available, there are diverse conclusions in relation to parental migration and its effects on left behind children, some claiming that the remittances sent by the parents increase the children's attendance in school, decrease the gender gap in education, reduce child labour and positively influence health and wellbeing (Glind, 2010; Catrinescu et al., 2011). At the same time, other studies show the strong negative impact of parental absence in the lives of these children (Nasritdinov & Schenkan, 2012; Sanghera, Ablezova, & Botoeva, 2011; Glind, 2010).

Results from the qualitative interviews with left behind children in Tajikistan showed different views on parental migration (Catrinescu et al., 2011). For instance, in a focus group discussion, one child reported: *"I think that if parents leave it is bad for everyone (...). The situation is getting worse and worse."* (ibid., p.45). Another 17-year-old boy claimed that his father [migrant in Russia] plays a big and important role in his life and that he misses him a lot. At the same time, the boy understands why his father had to migrate, saying that there is nothing he can do about the situation, because finding a job in Tajikistan is very hard (ibid.). Other children left behind by parental migration sought to look at the benefits it brings: *"Now we do not have to have debts, we can purchase school supplies, if one member of our family is sick we can get medical help... we eat quality food, can build a new house, have good clothes... we now have money, we can even arrange a wedding. With the departure of my father, our family has the opportunity for a fulfilling life (...). If my father was here and did not work, then we could not go to school, eat well, dress – we would be forced to borrow and the situation would be deplorable"*. (ibid., p.45). When the question was related to what their future plans are, some wanted to take the same path as their parents, and others wanted to do the opposite-stay in school, continue their education and seemed to have aspirations for more skilled jobs: *"I want to continue my studies in the future and become a doctor. Mum always says that I should definitely get an education and a profession and not work as she does, in the field"* (ibid., p.66). The evidence from UNICEF (Catrinescu et al., 2011) shows that there is a tendency for left behind children to become depressed, sad and withdrawn and this is more common in girls than in boys. Such sadness can be very disturbing for children, especially when they compare their situation with their peers: *"Others have fathers who care for them. I also want my father with me. If someone offends me, there is no one to intercede for me. I am very sad; sometimes I sit in despair and cry"* (p.93). A 15-year-old girl explained her feelings as such: *"Without mother it is hard for me, because I miss her. She's very good; I feel very lonely and I sometimes feel so sad I want to just call her and tell her to drop everything and come back... but then I calm down and think about my grandmother and say nothing"* (p.94). One may say that, the only positive impact of parental migration on left behind children is remittances and studies demonstrate that children's basic rights cannot be guaranteed.

But the question now arises as to whether the households with whom the children live receive money when it is urgently needed? Is the money received spent on the welfare and wellbeing of the child or not? These are important questions that require further investigation and analysis.



## 2.4 Left behind children in international migration

Most of the literature on the impact of migration on family members left behind focuses on transnational migration that takes place in poor countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, Caribbean and Ecuador. China on the other hand has been witnessing a massive internal migratory flow, which shares the same concerns about the children who are left behind in the rural areas. According to the All China Women's Federation, it was estimated that about 58 million children were left behind in China in 2009 (Jingzhong, 2011) either living with one parent, with grandparents or other relatives. In the Grassroot Voices (2011) authors such as Jingzhong, Lu, Chunyu & Huifang tried to elicit a deeper understanding of China's economic boom and the social costs it creates for children. Qualitative research was used with diaries and letters written by the children to their absent parents. Lu introduces us to a story of a nine-year-old girl Dongyue, who was brought up by her grandmother in the rural China province of Sichuan. She was 2 years old when her mother left to join her father for work in the city. While her friends were playing in the village, Dongyue spent most of her time helping her grandma with the housework, collecting firewood, working on the field. As Lu mentions (Jingzhong, 2011), "Dongyue's experience is typical of tens of millions of children who are left behind by their migrant parents" (p.623). It is only in recent years, that studies have shifted their focus on understanding the daily child care, wellbeing and psychological development of the left behind generation. Grassroot Voices's (Jingzhong, 2011) child centered approach collected over 3,000 letters to their parents from left behind children in China, which revealed both advantages (joy and reunion) and disadvantages (hardships, illnesses, loneliness and misunderstanding) of parental absence in the lives of their children due to migration. Most of the letters demonstrate how much the children missed their parents.

A paragraph from a letter of 13-year-old Linyi is one example: "*Dear Mom...I always cried since dad and you left. I wept a lot in the quilt. In aunt's home, I felt I was the extra one. When they talked with my cousin and comforted him because he failed an exam, I felt I was pricked by a needle. (...) Mom, you left when my younger sister was less than one-year-old. For all these years, I can remember, I have only seen you twice, and Dad, three times. You called back home once every two months. Mom, could you please come back more often? I know it is expensive to travel, but could you call back more often? I want to hear your voice. And I have so many things to tell you*" (p.626). What is more striking about the finding is that, words such as "loneliness" were mentioned 27 times, "having you in mind"-625, "come back"-328, "tears"-92, "crying"-152, "love"-427, "hope"-117. Since parents migrate in the hope of making the lives of their children better and to provide more opportunities for their future, at the same time they have great expectations. There is a new saying that parents use to justify their absence: "we migrate to work, all for you [children]" (Jingzhong, 2011, p. 630). The same applies to the context of Tajikistan (Catrinescu et al., 2011). This puts heavy pressure on the children, especially on girls who most of the time are put to the traditional gendered responsibilities of helping the guardians with

housework, taking care of their younger siblings or the children of others who share the same living space with them.

Another indicator of the children's wellbeing and condition depends on the financial input of their parents (Olwig, 1999). This condition, according to Olwig (1999), "does not merely relate to the children's material comfort, but, more generally, to their social and emotional well-being" (p.273). Research studies by Boccagni (2013) in Ecuador, Démurger & Xu (2015) in China, Duque-Páramo (2012) in Colombia share the same conclusions.

Some of the studies that used a child centered approach show that children are both social actors and subjects of social realities. Children left behind who are experiencing a life through a migratory process "while sharing some common realities with other family members, live their own experiences" (Duque-Páramo, 2012, p.472).

## **2.5 Child centered paradigm**

Children are often the most affected by adverse situations, because of their "relative immaturity and their lack of social power" (Boyden and Mann, 2005, p. 3 as cited in Crivello et al., 2008). When placing 'children's standpoints' in a context of poverty, it ensures the respect of diversity and their capacities "to think, feel, and aspire beyond 'survival'" (Ben-Arieh, 2005, as cited in Crivello et al., 2008, p 52). A child focused research approach positions children at the center of the research in which key discussions, questions, interpretations and analyses are made (Crivello et al., 2008). By allowing the involvement of children at different stages of this research process, we see them as competent social actors, who know more about their lives than anyone else and therefore are a credible source of data (Langsted, 1994 as cited in *ibid.*). It also includes the acknowledgement of their agency and vulnerabilities and their capacity for resilience in the face of hardships and adverse situations (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Schoon, 2006; Ungar, 2005 as cited in Crivello et al., 2008).

The analytical framework combines theories of the sociology of childhood, child centered paradigm, attachment theory, gender and migration studies. The methodology of this research draws its focus from two theoretical frameworks. The first is the sociology of childhood paradigm (James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1997; Solberg, 1990; Corsaro & Molinari, 2008), which emphasizes the importance of moving out from psychologically based models of socialization, but rather focus on the acceptance of children as active social agents who are capable of shaping the processes and structures around them and "whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right" (Barker and Weller, 2003, p 256). The second paradigm is child-centered ethnography as Cheney (2011) calls it: "attention to the ways children act, not just as objects of socialization, but as social agents and cultural producers in their own right" (James et al., 1998 as cited in Cheney, 2011 p. 165).

I will then explore the concept of ‘understanding’<sup>1</sup> used by Antonovsky (1996) to explain how left behind children perceive their situation and what coping strategies they use to overcome the hardships, pains and sadness. Antonovsky was interested in trying to understand why some people regardless of hard and stressful situations, stay healthy, while others do not? Antonovsky (1996) proposed a Sense of Coherence (SOC) construct, a personality characteristics which “refers to a disposition to look at life and its problems in a manner which makes coping easier” (Germano, 1996, p.4). The three elements of SOC explained by Antonovsky (1996, p.15) are:

- meaningfulness-wish to, be motivated to, cope
- comprehensibility-believe that the challenge is understood
- manageability-believe that resources to cope are available

The core of this paradigm is to focus on the realistic coping strategies used by people to overcome stressfulness and hardships (ibid.). I use the concept of ‘understanding’ in my research to analyze how the children give coherence to their situation of being left behind. If ‘understanding’ apprehends their rational explanation, secondly, I use the concept of ‘feeling’ to research their emotional perceptions.

Furthermore, I will use Collete Harris’s (2004) explanation of gender norms and formation of gender identities in Tajik society. Harris (2004), basing her theoretical background on Judith Butler, defines gender as: “a culture-specific ideal, varying over time, that males and females are supposed to live up to in order to become intelligible to, and accepted members of, their own communities” (p.14). Each society has its own ideals of how men and women should act, behave, and expresses its expectations accordingly (ibid.). In other words, when for example the girls in my study behaved submissively towards the household duties assigned to them by their caregivers, they are expressing their gender identities as young girls. While, the boys when asked if they helped with the house chores, answered that it is an inappropriate behavior for males, since it does not go with the masculinity norms in the Tajik society. Therefore, gender performance is “always mediated through the cultural norms of specific social group” (Schrijvers, 1999 as cited in Harris, 2004). At the same time, young men, as the children in my study, have subordinate relationships towards the adults in the household, meaning that both sexes are subject to gender norms, not only women (ibid.). It is in the family that norms of the Tajik society are internalized by children of both sexes, it is where they start to learn the appropriate gender performance, says Harris (2004).

Attachment theory (Howe, 2005) helped me analyze how the nature and quality of care can produce different attachment experiences and strategies, and how the parental separation influences the household relationship. The function of attachment, says Howe, is to protect the children from harm, danger and annihilation. The relationship between the child and the caretaker, or the person whom she/he builds the attachment to, plays an important role in the psychological experience of the child. Therefore, when children do not feel safe, secure, are anxious or they are in a state of distress, their attachment system is activated and their psychological experience is at its highest.

“In attachment theory, children monitor their environment for signs of danger and threat. For human infants, separation from their primary caregiver or an unresponsive attachment figure in

---

<sup>1</sup> An idea proposed by Dr. Liv Schjelderup

themselves is a sign of potential danger, which will activate attachment behavior” (Howe, 2005, p.41). Therefore, children usually seek attachment either to their parents or other caretakers, to be ensured protection, safety and comfort in times of need and distress (ibid.). However, for the maltreated child, the attachment system is activated, which we can observe in left behind children. There are few opportunities for them to feel relaxed and safe. This results from the short encounters with their parents and when being at school and feeling safer in that environment than home.

### 3. Methodology of the research

Most of the traditional research methods used to learn about children do not directly involve work with them, and therefore have been criticized in recent decades for carrying out research on children rather than with children (Barker & Weller, 2003). Thus, children in research rarely have an opportunity to speak out for themselves and be heard, when most of the time they are considered incompetent social agents and are powerless in relation to adults (Barker & Weller, 2003). Because of these challenges, and to address the power relation issues within the research area, I used a child centered research approach and ethnography (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008).

Various researchers and scholars argue that, despite the fact that states have adopted legal and ethical recommendations in relation to children's rights, such as ratification of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (Tajikistan being one of them), nevertheless children's views and voices are not taken into account during the decision-making processes that directly involve their lives. However, I do believe that 'voice' is a social construction, which is subject to change and as Komulainen (2007) writes: "'voices' manifest discourses, practices and contexts in which they occur" (p.13), therefore, to give children a 'voice' is a good starting point, but at the same time challenging. Hence, with this research I embark upon a new approach in learning about children, especially in the context of Tajikistan, and my conversations with them were context dependent, because communication is an intricate, context-bound paradox (Komulainen, 2007).

At the same time, these conversations that occurred between the children and me, the 'voices' that were exchanged between us created 'meanings' that give a picture of a life these children experience as of being left-behind. I base my definition of 'reality' on Smith's (2002 as cited in Komulainen, 2007, p.25) interpretation in terms of ethics in the area of research with children: "what is real to the subjects is what matters".

For me to understand the experiences and emotions of the left-behind children, qualitative methodology was used as a method to collect the data. Applying semi-structured, in-depth interviews, diaries, participant observations and field notes, I obtained data on the realities perceived by left behind children. These methodological approaches are explained in greater detail below.

The sections of the methodology chapter are as follows: 3.1 geographical scope of the fieldwork and why it was chosen 3.2 research methods used, 3.3 ethical consideration, and 3.4 methodological challenges and limitations.

### 3.1 Geographical scope of fieldwork and criteria for choosing it

The fieldwork was conducted during the period of mid-February to mid-March, 2017 (4 weeks). I left Lisbon on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February and reached Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February. Since it was winter, there are few flights from Dushanbe to Khorog (where the data was gathered), because aircraft are grounded at the first sign of poor weather, which means the slightest fall of snow, rain or fog can cause the flights to be cancelled. Nevertheless, it is one of the most beautiful flights, ascending through the mountain valleys of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, sometimes being so close to the peaks that it truly demands a high confidence in the pilots and in one's own survival instincts. The next morning around 7 am, I went to find a shared taxi at Dushanbe's Badakhshan bus stand. We waited for few more hours for the car to be full and left Dushanbe around 11 am for Khorog. It usually takes about 15 to 18 hours in the winter -time to reach Khorog, and in the summertime between 12 to 14, depending on the type of transport one chooses and the driver. The highway is called M41 or the Pamir highway and is the second highest international highway (4,655 m) travelling the Pamir mountains through Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan ("Pamir Highway", n.d.).

The travel from Dushanbe to Khorog and back took me about 15 hours each way, with rockslides, avalanches and underfunded road maintenance making the ride very risky and uncomfortable. The drivers who drive the route Dushanbe-Khorog-Dushanbe are well experienced or at least, have the trust from the people, since they drive the route twice a week and for many years. To bring an extra source of money to the family, these drivers take the risk of travelling with the people, especially during dangerous times of the year, starting from late fall to late spring. Though, I knew about the perilous nature of the trip, I could not refuse my keen interest in this topic which is of great importance in Tajikistan. Notwithstanding this, I have to mention that the scenery during the journey was breathtaking, especially driving alongside the Pyanj river that divides the borders between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Khorog city, the place of my fieldwork, is the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (the eastern part of Tajikistan). The area is shown in the following map<sup>2</sup>:

---

<sup>2</sup> **Source:** Nasser (2012): <http://nadimnasser.blogspot.com/>



The population of Khorog is approximately 30,000 people (OrexCa, nd.), mostly of the Pamiri ethnic group. The city is located at 2,000 m above the sea level at the confluence of the Gunt, Pyanj and Shokhdara rivers, right across the borders with Afghanistan (ibid.). Khorog is a regional administrative center, a main area for trade, transportation and education.

I, myself, was born in Khorog city and while growing up I have seen relatives, neighbors, people I knew or my family knew migrating to the Russian Federation for the better living conditions, better economic prospects and a greater possibility of supporting their families back home. I have seen children being left behind in the care of their extended family and I had always questioned how these children felt about the absence of their parents, what do they think about the decision that their parents made, how does this affect their upbringing, what happens to their wellbeing. Therefore, my interest in this question was rooted a long time ago and while knowing the community well enough, I wanted to understand it better through focused research and to lay the groundwork for further research, as well as for policy development and implementation.

## 3.2 Research methodology

Qualitative methods were used to collect data in this study. Such an approach helps to learn about people's understanding, values, beliefs, interpretations, preferences, priorities and the social context of a particular population (Patton and Chochran, 2002). The strength of such a research method is in its ability to provide a textual description of how people experience the research issue and, as Bryman (2012) explains, such an approach helps understanding of the area of research through the interpretations of its participants, which is the focus of my own study. Individual semi-

structured interviews, diaries and participant observation were the methods chosen. The children selected belong to the age group of 12-17 years-old, 3 girls and 3 boys (Table 6.)

**Table 6. Characteristics of interviewed children**

Name	Age	Age when parents migrated	Gender	Family members in migration	Caregivers/siblings
Majnun	14	1.5	male	Both parents	Aunt and her family. Brother and a sister
Ruslan	13	2	male	Both parents, sister and brother	Uncle and cousin
Shabnam	12	7	female	Both parent	Grandmother, uncle and his family, unmarried uncle and her brother
Rahima	14	1	female	Both parents, sister	Grand aunt/uncle and his family. Brother lives with mother's parents.
Anis	17	8	male	Both parents, sister	Lives with his cousin only
Sabzina	14	8	female	Both parents, brother	Grandmother, sister, unmarried uncle, married uncle and their son, aunt's children (2)

The first three respondents were found with the help of a local school and the rest using snowball sampling. According to Bryman (2012), snowball sampling is “a form of convenience sample, where the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses this to establish contacts with others” (p.202).

### 3.2.1 In depth semi structured interviews and participant observation

Bryman (2012) emphasizes that participant observation and semi-structured interviewing helps the researcher to keep an open mind on how the conversation is going and what he/she needs to know so that, at the end of the data collection, concepts and theories can be developed. With all the children who participated in this study, individual interviews were conducted either in their school, where most of them felt the most comfortable, or in Khorog central park. School plays an important part of their everyday life, because, half of their daily socializing takes place there. It is a space where they meet with their friends or classmates, spend time with them, play games and get engaged in other school activities. This is especially true for the girls, since, when at home, they are forced to carry out household tasks; therefore, school is one of the places where they can escape from that part of their everyday reality. This means I can assume that schools still function in some form or the other – against the background of all the problems we know about schooling in Tajikistan (corruption prevails, mean teachers, no real learning happening, physical and verbal abuse against children).

It was also useful to observe body language, their tone and the way they communicated with me which helped in facilitating my interviews with them. Because the topic itself is sensitive, I had to



pay attention to all the details expressed while talking to these children. For instance, with an interview with Shabnam (12, female) I had to be conscious, when asking questions related to her parents or the guardians (extended family) with whom she is living, because, her happy voice would always change to a sad tone and she would look fragile, evidencing her trauma.

### **3.2.2 Diaries**

At the end of the interview, each child was asked to write a diary for as many days as they wished. The main purpose of the diary was to get an idea of how the children spent their days, what they were involved with and how they were able to express their feelings. Using diaries as a method of data collection has not been given a great deal of attention (Bryman,2012) and thus is rarely used by social researchers. Based on the research conducted by Tekola (2008, as cited in Crivello et al., 2008) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, diaries can be a good source of data from young people, who see it as “like schoolwork”. It was obvious that none of the children who participated in the research have written a diary before, but it was explained to them how to write in it and at the same time they were given the choice of writing whatever comes into their mind. This resulted in one girl thinking that the diary was my journal, and she then wrote a letter for me with very kind words and wishes:

My dear Shukriya. When I first saw you, I thought you were a foreigner, because you don't look like a Pamiri girl. When I was told that you are a Pamiri girl, I got very interested...I did not expect us to become friends. During the whole class, I was thinking of you...When you asked me questions, I wanted to tell you all the truth...In one day, you have become very close to me...I really want us to be friends.

From the above passage, one can see that the purpose of the diary was misunderstood, but at the same time, throughout the letter, the word *friendship* was mentioned few times. This can possibly mean that the girl lacks someone to talk to and be an emotional support to her. During the interview, she also mentioned that she missed her mother a lot, because she is like a friend to her with whom she can talk about aspects of her life.

### **3.2.3 Case study**

The individual interviews with observation and diaries from children helped to create individual narratives or stories. A case study, according to Bryman (2012), is an analysis of a single case; in this context, a child who is left behind by parental migration. There are thousands of these left behind children in Tajikistan, therefore, one may say that, it can relate to a community case analysis as well. However, I am more interested in telling the stories of these children. Flyvbjerg (2006) says, a case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, while other methods are more suitable for hypothesis testing and theory building. In addition, case studies are helpful in investigating one or more units by gathering in-depth understanding of the issue studied. The advantage of this approach to this study, is that it gives an image of life experience by children who are growing up

without the presence of their parent. There are occasions when siblings are being split between the extended family. In addition, some of the most striking information was collected during informal meetings and observations with a few of the participants and is included in the analysis of this dissertation.

### **3.3 Ethical considerations**

Conducting research that involves children is not an easy task, thus the researcher must be prepared, throughout the whole research process, for any challenges that may emerge. The study used a ‘child-focused’ approach in order to give voice to the children, which acknowledges that “research with young people may pose special challenges for adult researchers, particularly in highly hierarchical societies which marginalize children’s views” (Boyden and Ennew; Punch 2002b as cited in Grivello, et al., 2008, p.55). Such acknowledgement was taken into account before going to the fieldwork.

It is important to confirm that all the children who participated in the study gave their consent and agreement. Their names have been changed to ensure their confidentiality. As a researcher, I also had to obtain consent from their guardians; however, none of these children wanted or wished for me to go to their houses and I was told by some that, even if their guardians didn’t give their agreement, they would nevertheless take part in my study. On one hand, Khorog is a very small city, where social ties are strong and most of the people would not give a negative response. On the other hand, this raised a significant ethical dilemma for me. While acknowledging that these children rarely have the opportunity to talk about their situation and the significance of this research in the migration studies, particularly in Tajikistan, I decided to interview them nonetheless.

Regarding the time and place for the interviews, adjustments were made for the children’s schedules, availability and convenience. Prior to conducting the interviews and observation, the respondents were given a thorough explanation about who I was, what the study was about and what the main aims were. Additionally, confidentiality was explained to them as well as their absolute right to withdraw from the research any time they wanted to.

### **3.4 Challenges faced and limitations**

As mentioned before, study that involves children can be challenging and requires patience and care. With the intention of focusing only on children and talking only to them, I prepared myself to be ready for any challenges that might occur throughout my fieldwork, such as difficulties in finding respondents, ethical issues, difficulties surrounding the sensitiveness of the topic. The topic of the research is, to a great extent, sensitive and this makes it even harder to talk about it with children, due to underlying assumption that being left behind is a problem. Therefore, this research focused on adolescents (age 12 to 18), who are more likely and able to participate and express themselves. One girl started calling me frequently after we had an interview, because she did not have a friend to talk to and spend time with. I agreed twice to meet her and walk around the city

with her, but at the same time I knew that I will leave soon and as a researcher I had to detach myself, so she would not build up hope and form an attachment with me which would be inappropriate for both of us. With some of the children, especially girls, when the discussion focused on their parents not being around, they spoke in a very low voice and became sad, so I always had to be very careful when asking questions about their parents and their feelings.

Before commencing the fieldwork, there was an intention to use other participatory research methods with the children, such as focus group discussion, photography and the possibility of a one night stay in the children's household, but with the limited time, unwillingness of the children to participate more actively due to being overburdened tasks at home, especially for the girls, and the sensitivity of the topic, these intentions were unfortunately not achieved. In addition, the timeframe devoted to this research was only 4 weeks, during the cold season, with a lot of snow this year. At the same time, there were several public holidays like celebration of Defender of the Fatherland Day (Russian: День защитника Отечества (Den' zashchitnika Otechestva) and 8<sup>th</sup> of March, Mother's Day, that intervened in the collection of the data. Sometimes, the timings of interviews were also rescheduled due to household issues. Finding children where both parents are in migration was also challenging, because there are more children with only one parent away due to migration. To this end, the participants represent a narrow range of those influenced by migration, and a larger sample would have been desirable. However, this study offers a preview of and first insight into the hidden world behind parental migration, a topic which is in need of greater in-depth research and observation over a prolonged period of time.

## 4. Findings

This chapter is focused on the presentation of the main findings from qualitative child-focused approach that will be presented in the form of narratives by the left behind children. Before presenting them, it is important to understand how family networking works in Tajikistan and what are the positions of the children within the hierarchy of the family structure.

### 4.1 Family relations in Tajikistan

In Tajik family networks, it is common that any relative can intrude in on the decision-making process and contribute to the social and economic position of the child. This means, depending on the circumstances, any relative can help with the economic wellbeing of the left behind children as well as a child being cared for by an extended family network, other than the parents. Therefore, as Olwig (1999) explains, it is very hard to say anything about the social, psychological and economic wellbeing of the child when the “parent-child unit is such” (p.268). In contrast in this research then the perceptions of the children come centre stage as the most important of all.

To begin the analyses of the data, it is necessary to understand the position of left behind children in the family environment and networks which predominate in Tajik society. This position is highly dependent on the age and gender of the child. For Tajik families, hierarchy appears normal and democracy is out of place (Harris, 2004), thus males are the heads of the family to whom the rest are subordinate. This advantages younger boys who have fewer restrictions and responsibilities, since they are brought up to eventually have the chance of becoming the dominant, decision-making family member. Young women on the other hand cannot and are therefore controlled and taught to become submissive and learn their gendered responsibilities of running the household and the social reproduction of its members, taking care of the youngsters (though they are still children themselves) (ibid.). This puts children left behind, particularly girls, in a more complicated position within the family hierarchy they live with; because their primary caregivers are far away, this increases the possibilities of domestic abuse in various forms.

### 4.2 Left behind children’s stories

As a researcher conducting this study and growing up in the same community, I wanted to challenge the power dynamics between adults and children, and between gender categories, as well as when producing knowledge about them (children). Therefore, I designed my research with these concerns in mind. I want to emphasize children’s participation, not only as subjects of data gathering, but also as young people who shaped the design and approach of the research.

This collection of brief stories or testimonies, based on the interviews and diaries of the children will give a glimpse of a typical split family situation in Tajikistan. In addition, the cases will try to

elucidate the dilemmas of the children's upbringing and wellbeing in the context of parental labour migration.

None of the children interviewed in this study has ever taken part in other research before. Their names are changed for ethical reasons. Reading these stories, one may get quite emotional, however, at the same time one may observe how courageous these children are to be able to survive such a childhood. I am not denying that such an experience can happen to any child, and that some lives of left behind children are doubtlessly comparable to those of non-left behind children. Nonetheless, the aim of my research is to focus on left behind children and their experiences, and give these children a chance to speak for themselves. With these stories, I want the readers to explore the many ways these children experience their parents' absence and what price they are paying for the economic advantage of labour migration in Tajikistan.

#### **4.2.1 Majnun: 14-year-old male**

My name is Majnun. I am 14-years old and I am in 8th grade. I was born in Leninabad [Khujand], but grew up in Khorog. I was one and a half years old when my parents left. They come for a short visit in summer time every year and leave again. I live with my aunt, her husband and her son. Her son is older than me and has already graduated from the university. I also have a little sister who lives with me. She is four years old. My older brother is also with us and he is in 11th grade (last year of senior school).

Family to me is like...I feel much better with them (parents). I feel more open and relaxed when my parents are around. I don't talk with my older brother much. When my parents are around, I go home very early. But, when they are far, I go home very late. When they are around, I also focus on my studies more. My aunt also pays attention, but I am used to having her around.

I like the school that I go to and I think I want to become a Tajik-Russian languages translator or work in the military. English and Russian languages are my favourite subjects in school. But, I would like to go to Russia and live with my parents. They told me to finish school first. I have never been there before and this summer I will go visit my parents.

When Majnun was one and a half years old and no longer needed to be breastfed, his parents left Khorog for labour migration in the Russian Federation and passed their toddler son to his aunt. Today, they (parents) are still labour migrants and their 4-year old daughter, older son (17-year old) and Majnun are being left to live and be brought up by their aunt and her family.

The interview with him and his best friend Ruslan (his story comes next) took place in one of the classrooms in their school. He seldom looked at me and his eyes were focused mostly on the table. He was reserved quiet and shy. Attachment theory (Howe, 2005), suggests that Majnun is withdrawn and not comfortable talking to people - perhaps adults, or perhaps just strangers. When I asked questions about feelings, it seemed that he did not understand what the word meant. Perhaps, the separation from his parents has affected his emotional development because of the broken 'attachment' with his biological parents. This was the case with most of the children, especially boys, thus I had to offer examples of happy moments, or sad moments, or confused moments, or angry moments. This helped to guide them in understanding what they felt inside. In the Tajik society, the traditional image of a 'real man' is not to show feelings and emotions, since they are signs of weakness. Young boys, from an early age, are taught to be strong since when

grown-up, they will be the heads of the family. Therefore, masculinity is “socially attached to the role of a breadwinner in the family—a man, a husband, a father” (Kasymova, 1987, p.38).

The same problem arose with understanding hobbies and I realised that these children possibly have never been asked what they enjoy doing in their leisure time or whether they have any leisure time, especially when I talked with the young girls. The answer to these questions would always be: “I don’t know”, which can be related to the fact that children in Tajikistan are taught to be passive and obedient. At the same time, women in Tajikistan have to display traditional characteristics of femininity which includes being obedient to men, being involved in household chores and taking care of children.

#### **4.2.2 Ruslan: 13-year-old male**

I am Ruslan. I am 11-years old and I live in Gulaken (neighbourhood). Oh no, I am 13 years old. I got confused [smiles]. My mom is from Shohdara (village close to Khorog) and my dad is from Gulaken. I live with my uncle, my cousin and my brother. He (uncle) is not married and my cousin I think is in her 2nd year of university. My mother left recently to Russia. My dad...I was 7 years old when he came to visit me and when I was 8. Now my parents are in Moscow and my sister and brother are also with them. I would also like to go and live with them. My parents told me that after I finish 9th grade, I will also join them. My brother is about to finish 9th grade and go to Moscow.

I know my parents left because of their children, but I was never asked my opinion. Family is very important I think. Family to me is...they lead you forward. Keep you away from doing bad stuff, make you do your studies, they keep you go forward. When they left, I was upset and it was hard for me in the beginning, but now I am used to it and it’s not that hard.

I think, I spend a lot of time on my phone and on the internet. They (parents) had control over it when they were around and I would go online only once a week for example. Now until very late at night, I play games and stay online. My uncle tells me to focus on my studies, but I stay online till 11 pm or even later. I also use Odnoklassniki (social network service popular in the Russian Federation and post-soviet countries) a lot. My parents and some friends are also there (Odnoklassniki). I talk with them (parents) through Odnoklassniki and Viber [free text/call messenger application]. I feel happy when I talk with my parents and my siblings. I don’t miss them though, why should I miss them?

Ruslan compared to Majnun is more instrumental in the way he thinks about his situation and parents. He seems to not experience a broken 'attachment' with his mother and he is able to smile and converse more confidently. He would rather be with his parents, but he has contact with friends and talks with his parents in social media as well as the hobby of surfing and social networking. He mentions that he does not miss his parents which may be that the emotional attachment with his parents has become weak but because he was with his mum for 7 years, he appears emotionally stable and able to talk about it. At the same time, because he is growing up in a traditional Tajik society, he is expected to be a ‘man’, to be ‘brave’ and not show ‘emotional weakness’ so the denial might demonstrate a gendered response. And although he was upset at the beginning, he is able to rationalize it unlike Majnun who is less emotionally expressive or open to express his feeling about it.

### 4.2.3 Shabnam: 12-year-old female

I am supposed to be in grade 6, but I am studying with 7th graders. I am 12-years old. I was born in Moscow and when I was one, my mother brought me here (Khorog). I entered first grade and she left again. Then she was gone for 5 years and decided to come for few months last summer holidays. Then she left again. I grew up with my grandparents and my uncle. Now my grandpa is gone and my uncle got married. Anyway, a very crowded family. My brother will be 11 tomorrow, so I made a cake for his birthday. She (mother) sends money mostly to my brother. But I don't need a lot of money. I asked money for a phone, because I smashed mine when I was angry but she didn't send me yet. My brother told her that he wants a tablet and they bought him right away. They love him more than me. When my brother gets sick, everyone takes care of him very well, please have a rest, take this medicine, this and that. When I am sick, everyone will just shout at me. My neighbour (Roila) is the same, she lives very close to me. Me and her cry every day. There was no such a day when we didn't cry.

Roila is the closest person for me. We meet and ask each other about how our days went. I will tell her that my grandma yelled at me and said this and that and she tells me the same things. My grandma and my aunt are the ones that yell at me the most, telling me to clean, I am so sick of that. I clean, but then it is dirty again. They tell me that I don't do anything, that all I do is go outside and play games and I get very angry. But, when I come back from school, I must do the cleaning. And you should clean it (house and garden) like 20 times a day. I also must take care of the little kids. It's a headache.

When my mom was around, I didn't do a lot of housework. Now I clean all the time. Last year, my mom came to Dushanbe (capital of Tajikistan) and me and my brother went there to meet her. We travelled around a bit. The days in Dushanbe were the best. We stayed for a week. We went to parks, to different shops and there is this shop which has everything. When your products at home are over, you can buy everything there. I felt happy and good when I was with her. When the time came for her to leave again, she just told me that she will go get a citizenship or whatever that is. I didn't like that she left. She is planning to build a house for us in the garden. She sent some money to my uncle so they can start the work soon. She said she needs to finish the house first and then take us there (Russia) as well. She said that if we will not be allowed to stay at home (her grandma's house) anymore, then where will we go. If my grandma will die, I don't know who will get the house. One of my uncles is claiming the house to be his, the nasty one, the taxi driver. He says that he will kick us out, we orphaned kids.

Today I had a busy day. I woke up around 06:50. I washed my face, did my praying and afterwards drank tea and dressed up. No, first I dressed up and then I had tea. Then I went to school and studied for 2 hrs. Afterwards, we had a preparation (for 23<sup>rd</sup> of February-Defender of the Fatherland Day, Den' zashchitnika Otechestva) till 12 pm. Then we went to the Youth Center and prepared once more for the final show. It went well and they will show us on TV tomorrow. I was in a play. I was a woman and my sons were about to go to the army. I like dancing more though. I take part in some activities in school. Soon we will celebrate 8<sup>th</sup> of March (Mother's Day in Tajikistan) and Nooruz (Persian New Year). We are two dancers in my class. And yes, I like baking too. Today I made a cake for my brother's birthday.

I went to Shabnam's house to interview her. She was busy making a cake, but was very eager and interested and at the same time a bit shy to talk with me. We were not able to talk at her house, because we couldn't find a separate room for the two of us. She lives in a Pamiri house, and the houses are designed in a way that there is a big living room where all the household members both sleep, cook and eat together. That is very normal in Tajikistan. Since it was also winter, the summer rooms could not be used. Therefore, the interview with Shabnam took place in my friend's place because they are neighbours.

Shabnam never mentioned her father and I heard that he is in Russia, but no one knows where exactly since he cut all contact with them. The implications of an absent father may have a great

impact in terms of Shabnam's emotions but may also impact on her mother and what the mother is able to do (Howe, 2005). Shabnam always had this sad laughter when questions were related to her mother or living with her extended family. Perhaps her laughter became a coping strategy to hide her emotions and feelings. It can also indicate sadness, sense of abandonment and a sense that there is nothing she can do about it.

Comparing herself with her brother could reflect both her sense of abandonment by her parents and the gender relations which privilege boys over girls. She experiences herself as less important than her brother, both to her absent parents and her current caregivers. Therefore, she finds comfort in her friend who shares the same experience.

Nonetheless, she shared some joyful moments in her diary of playing out in the snow with her friends, doing her homework in the sun and falling asleep, and going to a public bath: “My day was so good today. Me, Munisa and Tutiyo went to bathe. We had such a good relaxing time there” [26.02.2017]. Even though, Shabnam goes through hard times with her caregivers, she finds joy in little things. School and going for prayers seem to be an escape from the stress she feels at home and a safer space than being at home. It seems like Shabnam is growing up in an environment where her caregivers are dominant and use emotional coldness and aggression as tools to enforce the compliance of the children. This compliance/pressure is built around the Tajik gender order and Shabnam gets relief from this briefly when her mother comes for short visits.

#### **4.2.4 Rahima: 14-year-old female**

I am 14-years old and I was born here (Khorog). I live with my great aunt. And my brother lives with my mom's parents in UPD (district). I was born and they (caregivers) took me in their care. My mother gave birth to me before her wedding. I even attended their wedding day. I was only 2 months old, so I don't remember anything. I live with 5 other kids and my mom (her great aunt), she is almost my mom, whom I have to take care of, my uncle's aunt, her husband, her son and her daughter in law.

My mom has been away for a very long time now. I was only in my 2nd grade when I saw her for the last time. My dad was here last year and left in October [2016]. He came for the funeral of his grandma. I think I see them (caregivers) as my family, not my real mom and dad. I am not used to them being around. I don't call them *mom* and *dad*. I use *hey* when I talk with them. But, I also don't like my family (caregivers) much. They yell at you or make fight out of no reason. They call me *cow* and I don't know what else...

I get in fight with my grandma a lot, she makes me angry. She always gives me work to do around the house. Like they are so lazy, they don't even get up to take water for themselves, no, they should ask me to do it.

When my dad was around, they were much nicer to me, but as soon as he left, everything was the same again. I think I would like to be somewhere very far all by myself, like completely alone. When I go home, I would lock myself in my room and stay alone. Then I take my phone and take selfies. Then I delete them. Sometimes my uncle and my grandpa enter the room and start yelling that I am always with my phone, that I am not studying. But I do my homework. I don't know what do they lack. I hate when someone is around me. I hate it so much. I like when strangers are around me, but the people with whom I live, I hate to have them around me. They irritate me.

When I am sad I don't tell about it to anyone. It's like, when I am sad, everything disappears from my head. I like to be alone and listen to loud music. I also rage a lot.



I want to leave the Pamirs soon and go to Paris or Beijing. I don't know why I want to go there...I want to study there. It is great there. I saw pictures and in the movies. Anyway, I want to visit all cities in the world. I would like to learn English, then go abroad and study and then work. Here (Khorog) how to say, the people, the guys are so wild. And also in schools they don't teach you anything and you don't know nothing. The teachers only yell at you. If you ask them questions, they tell you they don't know. Then you will become dumb.

The first day I met her, Rahima was in her school. She approached me herself and was curious about what was I doing there. She thought that I was a foreigner and that I might teach English in their school. We introduced each other and exchanged contacts to meet for the interview day. She seemed shy, but at the same time she was very willing to talk to me. When I left her, Rahima started calling me several times until our meeting day, just to know that we will still meet. She seems to have an attraction to strangers or is looking for contact and attachment with an older person, which may substitute for her mother. It is also possible that she doesn't feel pressured from strangers because of the negativity she feels when home.

Rahima was very open about her anger towards her caregivers and how disgruntled she gets when she is at home. She is exhausted with the household responsibilities she is forced to do and in addition taking care of the children, because of gender order and division of labour in Tajik society. Therefore, she is hurt and angry at her caregivers and this might be reflected in her hatred.

The presence of her father last year gave Shabnam a chance to experience a different life with her caregivers, but as soon as he left, the previous workload, mean attitude, conditional love and anger, all came back. The caregivers may resent Rahima's biological parents because they are away while they look after the children. They may take this frustration out on Rahima.

Rahima grew up without the presence of her parents, therefore she has little emotional connection to them, no 'attachment' was made. However, at the same time her 'attachment' with her caregivers is weak as well, with the tension and criticism she experiences at home. Therefore, she has created a fantasy of living in a faraway place based on images she has seen.

We met twice after that first interview, since she started calling me quite often and appreciated our talks. She told me that she has no one to talk to and I believe she was developing an emotional attachment to me, which I could not accept; firstly, because I am a researcher and secondly, because I was about to leave Khorog soon and I would not be there for her in case she needed to talk with someone. This suggests an unmet need for care and protection among these children which, in countries with better welfare system and social protection services, these children would probably meet in a support group. As Tajikistan is poor at making such provision, Rahima has to manage as best she can.

#### **4.2.5 Anis: 17-year-old male**

I understand "family" as a group of people who live together in one house. They are family. For example, father, mother and children, sister and brother. At the moment, it's me and my cousin who live in our apartment. My brother studies in Dushanbe and my sister is in Moscow with my parents. I was in my 2nd grade when my parents left to Russia. In 2010 they came for a month and left again. In the beginning,

when they left my aunt lived with me, my brother and sister. Then she got married and our other aunt came to live with us. When my brother got older, he also went to Moscow and we started living by ourselves. Sometimes my grandma would come for a visit.

I remember, when they came for a visit, I felt...I didn't feel the hardships before and I thought that when they will come, I would feel nothing. I was away when they arrived. I was in Shokhdara (village). I talked with them before they left Moscow. Nothing changed inside me. When they arrived here (Khorog), they called me the next morning. But I told myself that even when they come, I will take it easy and will leave Shokhdara when I feel like it. It was great there too. When they called me, and said they are home, I dressed up fast, didn't even have breakfast and immediately jumped in a car and went home. I was very happy. We were together for a month and then they left again. Everything was so different when they were around. They took us to different places with them, we visited our relatives together, like this. We were all the time together, it was great. Then they left. When they left, it wasn't that hard to me, it was as usual. I knew they will leave again, so I prepared myself for that. They told us before that they will stay only for a month. I was ready for that.

I think, for my family migration was a big plus. When my parents were here, my dad would find a job in the bazaar (local market) and work, but there were many moments when we had financial problems. When they left, everything started to become very good, they helped us in so many ways. I think it has been a great plus for us from one side. But there are many minuses as well. I think children should grow up with their parents until high school, if not, at least till 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But, in my family, my grandma and grandpa, my aunts were very nice. But in some cases, families can turn up not very nice and this can be tough for the children and they can get behind a lot of things. Parents are parents, they will take care of their children completely differently.

Now I want to be closer to my parents. I am graduating this year and I don't know how I feel really. If I will be accepted to any university, especially in Russia that will make me very happy, but if not I will be sad. To be unemployed and unengaged in something is bad, very bad. I might start reading less, I will lose a year of my life and my classmates will be ahead of me. My parents are in Russia, so I would like to go there. There is one website I have been told about "Russia.Study". I registered myself there. Otherwise, I will try in Dushanbe capital of Tajikistan).

Like before I didn't know what I want to be and what I want to study. I always had an issue with that. One time I said economics, another time I said journalism. When I got older I realized that everyone wants to apply to study economics and journalism, there are no jobs here (Khorog) for it. After, STEP (Secondary Education Teacher Programme) taught us one combination that if you plan to choose a profession, learn if that profession is important and what are the possibilities for getting a job. Then I considered tourism. Many of our Mawla (Aga Khan IV, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili muslims) programs also work with tourism, not the government. And nowadays it is an important field and there are opportunities to get a job in the future. It is getting better and better in Tajikistan. I want to study well and get a good job. Now the plan is this.

Anis was very open and confident with his answers. When reading his diary, he mentioned that he was very happy that he talked with me about this topic. It also reminded him of his childhood times. Anis was very young when his parents migrated, and by the time he grew up he could compare the advantages and disadvantages that his parental migration has brought into his life. It seems like Anis has learned to live alone. Even though he senses the feeling of being abandoned, Anis does not feel 'attached' to anyone nor does he want to have an 'attachment', because he is used to people not staying.

His parent's visits were moments of joy and happiness, but at the same time he cannot invest much into the relationship because he comprehends that they will leave again. In addition, though

he senses that his caregivers have not been unpleasant to him or mistreated him, being with his biological parents makes him feel different.

Anis has a clear attitude about his future and to education. He wants to have a career but is worried that it might not happen. Perhaps seeing his parents leave for cheap labour migration, Anis wants to achieve better than that as well as work in his own country.

#### **4.2.6 Sabzina: 17-year-old female**

I live with my grandmother, my sister, unmarried uncle, married uncle and their son and my aunt's two children.

I was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when my mom left. Then she came for a visit after 2 years and left again and then another visit after 2 years and stayed until I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

She told me that she will go and save some more money for me during the one year, so I can apply to a university afterwards. It was very hard in the beginning for me. I was missing her a lot, but eventually I started to get used to being far from her. I mean, mother is mother and no one can replace her. There are moments at home or when I am in school when I think about my mother a lot and I feel very sad about it. I want to go to Moscow after my graduation. But, I have to tolerate, because she is doing this because of me, so I can have a brighter future. The times she came to visit me were the happiest of my life. I was immensely happy. We were like friends, I told her everything and she told me everything.

So many things are different when she was around. For instance, there are moments when I am sad and have difficulties and there is no one to talk to about them. I can of course tell them to her by phone, but when my mom is close to me, it is different. If I needed something, even if she refused to give me or buy it to me, I anyway felt safe, because my mother was close to me. There are moments when I just want to hold her, when I want to tell her so much news about my life, about my problems, about my future life and get advice from her. When she was near me, how to say, I didn't need anything else. But, then I think about school and today, education is very important, so I understand her absence.

When she was here, she helped me a lot with household work, I almost didn't do anything and now I have to do everything myself. Whenever she calls me and asks how I am, I would tell her that you have killed me with your household duties from childhood. So, when she was not here, it was very hard for me to do all the household duties by myself. And also, I was never worried about money if I needed it, because I always ask her and she never refused me or clothes. Now no one would buy me a piece of cloth and I am always told to study rather than think about clothes.

When I go home, it's all about work and work. I have to make all the beds, brush and wash the house and we have very big rooms. Then washing the dishes throughout the day, fetching water, cooking food. The water basin is also quite far from our house, so I have to fill all the water dishes as well. They are overusing poor me. Because of the household chores, I get very tired and angry. My uncles don't even fetch water. We (women) have to do everything.

But, hopefully I will leave Pamir soon. I am very sad and I feel very overwhelmed here. Like my mom is far away from me and I am overwhelmed about everything. That's why I don't want to be here and nothing is interesting here. Especially when I feel sad, my mom is far, so I hold everything inside me. Crying is my remedy. I cannot open myself to anyone. I let go of pain with my tears. The more I cry, the better and relieved I feel. I am also very sensitive person and I almost always cry. That's why I want to continue my studies and explore different cities, to learn English language and travel. I don't dream of going to Moscow, because I will anyway be able to go there one day, but really want to go to other cities in the world.

Based on attachment theory (Howe, 2005), Sabzina maybe more stable since she created an 'attachment' to her mother, but she feels the loss and the absence of her mother's physical

presence more. She feels safe when her mother is around, because her mother can protect her from any verbal or physical harm that might occur from her caregiver's side.

Though Sabzina accepts the absence of her mother and the challenges it brings along she (Antonovsky, 1996), at the same time she suffers from the loss of intimacy and misses the physical closeness and reassurance.

Again, we see the gender division of labour in the household, that puts Sabzina under a lot of pressure and makes her feel overwhelmed. And because her 'attachment' figure, who is her mother, is away, she turns her emotions inwards and cannot express them to the people with whom she lives. To escape the female role in Tajikistan, she fantasizes about escaping to foreign places.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

For the analysis of my research, I used thematic content (Bryman, 2012), based in the excerpts and summaries of the children's narratives, as well as in the articulation of the theoretical framework. I will start with the main research question (section 5.1) and try to explain the way these children understand their current position of being left behind and the feelings attached to it. In section 5.2 I elucidate the changes that the children feel and see when their parents come for short visits during the summer times. In section 5.3, I explain the joys, happiness and, at the same time, pain and sadness in their voices. In section 5.4, I analyse the coping strategies used by the left behind children to overcome the state of hardships they go through. And lastly, in section 5.5, I explain the gender differences in their experiences of being left behind.

### 5.1 Understandings and feelings of left behind children in Tajikistan

The migration of parents and the relocation of children into new households in Tajikistan is a well-known reality of everyday life. According to Duque-Páramo (2012), parental migration is a term that reflects children's experiences. The literature on migration in Tajikistan reveals that the main reasons for this migration are economic pressures exacerbated by high levels of unemployment in the country. (Olimova & Bosc, 2003; Catrinescu et al., 2011; Akramov & Akramov, 2015; Catrinescu et al., 2011). Interestingly, the children in this study understand the situation by putting the focus on themselves, they said their parents left to provide a better life and opportunities for them. As Majnun (14, male) said: *"They want a better life for us"*. Anis describes how, when his parents were based in Tajikistan, they faced many financial constraints, but as soon as they left they started to send money that helped him and his siblings to obtain the basic necessities of daily life. It was evident that the children's understanding of why they have been left behind to live with their relatives is because their parents want to support them financially in their everyday life and to have a better future together: *"She [mother] is doing this because of me, so I can have a brighter future. She told me that she will go and save some more money so I can apply to a university afterwards"* said Sabzina (17, female). The interviews with the children made it clear that they comprehend the reasons behind their parents' absence or at least they have been told so. They have accepted the challenge and have a sense of coherence of a left behind life experience.

Their sense of coherence can also be related to the fact that migration has become a normal part of family life in Tajikistan. These children perhaps have relatives whose parents are in migration, neighbours, friends and students in their school who also experience a split life without their biological parents. Thus, to a certain extent growing up without the presence of parents has become normalized. This comprehensiveness says Antonovky (1996) determines how these children

respond to their experience, the way they cope with being left behind and the challenges surrounding it.

Yet, these children also emphasized the importance of parents and parental presence in their lives and the impact it has for them on an emotional level. As Sabzina (17, female) said: *“I mean, mother is mother and no one can replace her. There are moments at home or when I am in school when I think about my mother a lot and I feel very sad about it”*. My conversation with Rahima (14, female) gave me the same impression. When I went through her diary, there was a passage dedicated to ‘grievance’: *“Grievance is a hard feeling. Grievance for me is a hard and painful feeling, caused by hiding my anger inside, against the background of low self-esteem. It puts you in position to either blame the circumstances or yourself. I don’t want to feel this because it pushes me towards unfairness and suicide”*. This is a very emotional reading and can be extremely disturbing for children who experience it, especially when they lack a physical person to talk to when needed. Most of the research conducted on parental migration demonstrates that one of the most important impacts on children’s lives is their psychosocial well-being (Catrinescu et al., 2011; Jingzhong, 2011; Reyes, 2007; Duque-Páramo, 2012; Asis, 2006). The data from a qualitative study in Tajikistan, carried out by UNICEF (Catrinescu et al., 2011), which compared children from non-migrant, abandoned and migrant household, shows that left behind children have a greater tendency to become aggressive, to withdraw, and to become sad and depressed. In my research, aggressiveness was more evident in girls than in boys. This appeared to be the result of being involved in household chores such as cleaning the house, washing the dishes, making beds and fetching water, as well as taking care of other little children and grandparents in the household.

During my conversations with these children, I have witnessed waves of emotions and feelings attached to the question of being left behind. There were moments of laughter, joy and at the same time sadness, anger, worries and weariness. Children talked with happiness about the period when their parents came to visit them, when they were hoping or fantasizing about travelling the world; however, there is a lot of sadness, anger and loneliness. There is no response to these children’s signals of need and distress from their caregivers and/or from their far away parents. Communication, which according to Howe (2005), is very important for children’s psychological development, seems to be missing. These children seem to miss a figure in their lives with whom they feel attached. Therefore, when children are abused and their caregivers or parents at time of need are not available, or the attachment they build with the caregivers who themselves may provoke feelings of fear and anxiety, they have a greater chance of feeling emotionally insecure and have difficulty making relationships (ibid.). In countries with a good welfare system, the social protection services would intervene and try to help these children. But, in Tajikistan with its weak economy, limited welfare system and social protection, children have no other choice but to accept the situation they are in and cope with it.

Howe’s (2005) attachment theory is of great help to analyze the feelings and relations of the left behind children towards their caregivers.

“In attachment theory, children monitor their environment for signs of danger and threat. For human infants, separation from their primary caregiver or an unresponsive attachment figure in themselves is a sign of potential danger, which will activate attachment behaviour. If children feel frightened or

distressed, their attachment system is activated, triggering attachment behaviour. The goal of the attachment system is protection, and once the goal has been achieved, the system switches off. Reunion with an attuned and sensitive caregiver reduces physiological arousal and emotional distress” (Howe, 2005, p.41).

The data from my empirical research shows that these children, experience an unresponsive attachment figure which leads them to feeling not protected. If the relation with the caregivers is not secure and positive, the attachment behaviour of the children is always disrupted. The purpose of the attachment is to protect the child from vulnerability and danger, whereas, fear and neglect may compromise the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child (ibid.) When I interviewed the children, particularly the girls, they didn't seem to have an attachment figure in the household, since there are chances that they will be verbally or physically abused if they don't do the household chores. For this reason, most of the time, they don't want to go home because the sense of safety is lacking. In my field notes, during the encounter with Rahima (14, female), she was disturbed by a headache and I proposed to reschedule the interview. However, she replied to me that she would rather spend the whole night talking to me than go home. This shows her insecurity in the household where she lives and a lack of emotional attachment.

## **5.2 Changes occurred in the feelings and lives of children by the short visits of their parents**

This initial sub-research question focused on understanding how the children explain their lives when they lived with their parents and the changes that occurred after their parents migrated for work. However, when conducting the interviews, I found out that almost all of them were very young, starting from being two years old, when their parents decided to leave for labour migration (see Table 6). Therefore, the meaning of change for the children is instead articulated through the short visits of their parents during the summer and when they leave again. These short encounters and moments were explained to me with the feeling of happiness.

Being physically with their parents is a different experience from communicating with them through social media or by phone. They felt secure, more confident, happy as well as engaged in some travels. The young girls are less engaged in the household duties, or their mothers would do it for them. Sabzina (17, female) has a strong emotional bond to her mother and her visits seem to be the happiest moments in her life: *“When she came, I was immensely happy. We were like friends, I told her everything and she told me everything. And when she was around, I almost didn't do anything around the house, she was helping”*.

The visit of their parents is an opportunity for some to go to Dushanbe (capital of Tajikistan), where there is the possibility to attend a variety of leisure places like amusement parks, museums and the zoo. *“We met in Dushanbe and travelled around a little. The days in Dushanbe were the best. We stayed for a week, we went to park, to different shops”* said Shabnam (12, female). It is also an occasion to visit relatives in the villages or when their parents are invited to dinners, the children would accompany them as well. Rustam expressed the time spent with his parents as

positive, because it gives him the opportunity to be outside of his household and visit other extended family members: *“We went to see relatives around. It was fun and nice”*. Anis (17, male) added: *“Everything was different, it was great. They took us to different places with them, we visited our relatives together, like this. We were all the time together, it was great”*.

These short visits are an occasion for the parents to show their affection, care and love to their children. It is also a time to compensate for their absence and make their children happy. Acknowledging the fact that the parental stay is temporary, the children also try to make the time being with them joyful whilst mentally preparing themselves for the day when their parents leave again.

It is important to note, however, that, the parents of the children do not come every year, which means these children sometime may not see them for many years. This is due to different reasons. Firstly, the majority work in low paid and unskilled jobs like cleaning and work on construction sites, where they received few resources which do not allow them to afford even yearly visits. Secondly, there is the possibility of not working the whole year which means that the regularity of the jobs is not assured. Thirdly, the obstacles created by the authorities of the Russian Federation (main country of destination) for the migrants to have a permanent stay in the country make travel difficult. For this reason, some are afraid to leave the country in case they are unable to enter it again. Fourthly, some migrants want to save the money they so they can build a house in Tajikistan and live with their children in the future. Migration theories show that these practices are common for international migrants with unskilled jobs (cf. King, 2012).

### **5.3 Hopes and pains expressed by left behind children**

Despite growing up in an adverse or vulnerable environment, my research data, nevertheless shows that these children may display resourcefulness, hopes, dreams, optimism and resilience as shown by my research data and other literature (James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1997; Solberg, 1990; Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Crivello, et.al., 2009). The fact that children have their parent abroad gives them the idea of also being able to go abroad in the future. Migration theories show that, an individual's decision to go abroad is highly influenced by already having a family member who has migrated (Kind, 2012). In the case of the left behind children in Tajikistan it goes even further, creating a space for the children to dream about visiting and travelling the world. As Rahima (14, female) mentioned: *“I would like to leave Pamir. I want to go to Paris. To Beijing also. I want to go study there”*. The same view was expressed by Sabzina (17, female): *“First of all, I just want to leave and get away from the Pamir. And afterwards, study and study, explore different cities. To learn English well and go to cities. I don't dream to go to Moscow, because I will anyway be able to go there, but I really want to go to other cities”*.

What is interesting is to see the difference in gender perspective about their future dreams and plans. While the young girls wanted to go further than Russia, to Europe for example, as shown above, in contrast, the boys wanted only to go to Russia or stay in Tajikistan. *“I want to learn Russian well, so I can enter any university in Moscow”* says Majnun (14, male). Rustam (13, male) expressed a similar view: *“I want to go to Moscow. My parents told me to finish 9th grade and afterwards join them there”*. The same thoughts are shared by Anis (17, male): *“I thought of*



*studying in Russia somewhere, like my dad and mom are also there*". This shows that despite growing up in a hostile environment, or having weak emotional attachment, we should not forget that they are children who create imaginings and hopes for their future.

The feelings of the children sometimes are a combination of both pain and hope. Though, these children want to continue their studies and take a different path from that of their parents, at the same time, they felt pressured to study hard and achieve a brighter future. When I talked to Sabzina (17, female) for example, she told me that most of the talk with her mother via social media or phone is about her homework, that she has to achieve better in life: *"Well, it is always the same. How am I? How are my studies? Am I studying good? We want you to study well [...]. My mom would always tell me to not end up like her. She works as a cleaner"*. The children appear to resent the focus of the communication between them and their parents being on school performance, rather than on themselves, their emotions and feelings, their concerns and ideas. In the series of Grassroot Voices (Jingzhong, 2011) from China, left behind children expressed "feelings of 'failure', letting parents down and not being good enough" (p.618), when they received low grades at school. Thus, even if education is an important path to having a better life in the future, the overwhelming focus on it can be counterproductive in the lives of children (ibid.).

One of the strongest pains expressed by the children is not having a person to talk to about their feelings. Based on the interviews and diaries, they demonstrate feelings of loneliness, isolation, withdrawal, anger and tiredness. This again, was gendered, since girls were more willing to tell me about their feelings than the boys. For example Sabzina (17, female) missed her mother a lot:

*"So many things have changed. For instance, there are moments when I am sad and have difficulties and there is no one to talk to about them. I can of course tell them to her by phone, but when my mom is close to me, it is different. If I needed something, even if she refused to give me or buy it to me, I anyway felt safe, because my mother was close to me. There are moments when I just want to hold her, when I want to tell her so many news about my life, about my problems, about my future life and get advices from her. When she was near me, how to say, I didn't need anything else. But, then I think about school and today, education is very important, so I understand her absence."*

Some children even feel abused by their caregivers, which can result in insecurity and not feeling protected while they are home. *"When they yell at you, you don't like it. Like...sometimes they yell at you without any reason, when I don't listen to them or do what they ask me to do. After they make a fight out of no reason [silently]. They call you a cow [laughs] and I don't know what else..."* said Rahima (14, female). Then she adds: *"I fight with my grandma a lot. She makes me angry. She always gives me work to do around the house"*.

One important output from these experiences reported by the children is their awareness of being abused. Secondly, they are aware of being overused by their caregivers in the maintenance of the household. Awareness is the first step to coping with the psychological offence and to overcome it. They are already giving coherence to their traumatic experiences (Antonovsky, 1996). Shabnam (12, female) wrote in her diary: *"Today my grandma beat me and called me a slut. I don't like such expressions..."*. We may assume that even if these children do not tell us everything that is inside them, it is evident that they feel they don't deserve such a treatment.

Moreover, the girls experience being less well treated than boys do by their caregivers. This relates to the cultural upbringing in Tajikistan, but nevertheless highlights some extent of abuse. *"When my brother gets sick, everyone takes care of him very well, please sit and have a rest, take this medicine, this and that. When I am sick, everyone will just shout at me. [...] My grandma and my aunt are the ones that yell at me the most, telling me to clean, I am so sick of that. I clean there, but then it is dirty again"* says Shabnam (12, female).

## 5.4 Coping strategies used by left behind children

Anna Solberg (1990) emphasizes that even if the position of a child is weak in the family, they are not passive in adapting themselves to what the adults say. She adds, in everyday life, children have and make use of considerable freedom of action” (p.124). In other words, these young children find other ways of creating free time when they get involved in something that is favourable to them.

To avoid cleaning the house, watching over the little ones, or fetching water, the girls sometimes stay in school for longer, or they would go to the local youth centre or American Corner (a space/centre organised by the American government that highlights American culture, events, programmes, etc.). After evening prayers some of the girls chat with neighbours/friends or get involved in volunteering. For instance, Sabzina (17, female) told me: *“I like to stay in school after my classes are done and hang out with my classmates. If I go home, I will immediately start doing the cleaning. Sometimes, when I get home later, someone else has done the cleaning. Not all the time though”*. Rahima (14, female) said: *“You can spend your time there (school) and time passes by very fast. If you are at home, the time goes so slow”*. From the last testimony, we assume that the school environment is felt to be a safer space for the children than home.

Another coping strategy used by the children is communication by social media and phone. This gives an opportunity for the parents to do parenting from afar and for the children to feel less distant from them. *“We talk through Viber (free messenger application). I feel very happy”* said Majnun (14, male). *“I use Odnoklassniki [social network service popular in the Russian Federation and post-soviet countries] a lot”* adds Rustam (13, male). This reveals that it is a transnational parenthood, since the parents keep communicating with children (Carling, et al., 2012), while being in labour migration in the Russian Federation. This communication is to “exchange information, in a broad sense, and by extension, to engage emotionally with each other” (ibid., 203).

The results from my interviews and diaries also reveal that, while these children lack emotional attachment, crying is used as a relief mechanism to feel better. *“I will cry a lot. Crying is my remedy. I cannot open myself to anyone. I let go of pain with my tears [sad laughter]. The more I cry, the better and relieved I feel”* said Sabzina (17, female). In contrast, boys seem to hide their emotions and feelings, which can be related to the issue of masculinity in the Tajik society, as emotional display (except anger?) is considered weakness and not “manly” (Harris, 2004).

## 5.5 Gender differences in experiences of being left behind

James and Prout (1997) indicate childhood, as an element in social analysis cannot be fully detached from other variables such as gender, ethnicity, or class. The gender of the children in migrant households appears to highly influence the experiences and lives of the left behind children in different aspects of emotions, and feelings in everyday life. Tajikistan has strong gender

norms and girls and young women, according to Harris (2004), experience a more rigid control over their lives than males do. The social construction of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ in the Tajik community can be observed and analyzed through the interviews and diaries of the children. The boys are influenced by traditional and stereotypical views on masculinity that limit themselves in expressing their feelings and lead them to bottle them up. Since growing up in the same community, I have been exposed to circumstances when young boys from a very early age are told not to cry since it is an act that a girl does and damages their manliness. This gender difference is so obvious that almost no-one talks about it or questions it. “It is not enough simply to internalize gender ideals; it is also necessary, repeatedly to demonstrate adherence to them through one’s behaviour” (Harris, 2006, p.69). This means that people are expected to act and behave in a certain way within the societal norms acceptable for their age and sex (Butler, 1990 as cited in *ibid.*).

The traditional gender role division makes the experience of the life of left behind girls harder in relation to being exposed to an extensive (excessive?) amount of household chores. “*I have to clean the house several times in the day. Sometimes I get angry and throw everything away and just leave*” says Shabnam (12, female). “*Because of the household chores, I get very tired and angry*” adds Sabzina (17, female). Rahima (14, female) claims that, since her parents are not around, her grandparents are overusing her to do house work: “*I am not saying that my mom does not pay attention to me learning the housework, but my grandma makes me do everything. I am very tired every day. And sometimes, if I refuse to do what they say, I will be yelled at*”. Majnun (14, male) was told that house chores are the duties of women, therefore they don’t have those same responsibilities. “*My aunt is cleaning the house and cooks food for us. She told me that it’s a woman’s job*” said Majnun. Whereas Anis (17, male) emphasized the importance of teaching both sexes household chores and responsibilities: “*Me and my brother almost didn’t have anything to do around the house. For instance, we would be asked to go to the market and buy a bread, but my sister was taught to do everything. Preparing the bed, making bread, cleaning the house, washing the clothes. I am living now with my cousin who is also male and we have to do everything ourselves. It would have helped me if I was taught all this before. I think boys should learn it as well. When they end up in a situation like mine for instance, that can help them a lot*”. Nevertheless, at the end he mentions “*but, girls need it more than boys do*”.

The evidence from the UNICEF (Catrinescu et al., 2011) shows that there is a tendency for left behind children to become depressed, sad and withdrawn and this is more common in girls than in boys. Such sadness can be very disturbing for children, especially when they compare their situation with their peers: “*Others have fathers who care for them. I also want my father with me. If someone offends me, there is no one to intercede for me. I am very sad; sometimes I sit in despair and cry*” (p.93).

Through these voices, one may understand how important it is in Tajik society for adults to teach children their gendered norms from their early years. In case of left behind children, particularly girls, the burden of being overused to do the chores at home results in feelings of anger, insecurity and being overwhelmed. Although, children’s acceptance of the norms is induced coercively, they will think of them as the way things are (Harris, 2004). Yet, this does not necessarily mean the children have fully accepted the norms, says Harris, and nor does it mean that

all children are simply submissive to the adults, or that all parents/caregivers are autocratic (ibid.).

## 6. Conclusion

Children growing up without their parents as a result of the process of labour migration are subjects to forces beyond their control which have the capacity to impact negatively on the daily life and their development. However, children are not merely passive victims in this but are active agents in the way they experience their situations and manage the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is common, in the frame of social sciences, to neglect the child's perspective in the study of migration or parental migration, (Evans, 2013; Cheney, 2011; Alderson, 2001; Crivello, et.al., 2009;) especially in the context of Tajikistan, where thousands of parents migrate to find work which will improve their economic situation and enable them to give their children better life conditions (Olimova & Bosc, 2003). The six testimonies in this study provide important information which helps us better to understand the feelings of children and the way they try to give coherence to their situation of being left behind. They also help us to picture the kinds of home environments and family/household relations these children experience.

In Tajikistan, people tend to develop and maintain close relationships between family members, and parents retain significant power over their children, as a result of which, young people are expected not to have a voice of their own (Harris, 2006). It gets more complicated when parents are away and the children feel more obliged to listen to the caregivers, who are taking on the responsibilities of their biological parents.

The results are revealing and give an impression that the absence of the parents is traumatic or hard, especially for girls. One may say that parental migration from Tajikistan costs a high price which is largely borne by the many children throughout the country who are left behind by this practice. Yet, these children are capable of finding ways to cope with the absence of their parents and the hardships faced in the households within which they live.

The new sociological theory of a childhood paradigm has shown that child development and child socialization happens in varied ways across societies, depending on the context-specific practices of child upbringing, and that different material conditions demand different ways of childrearing (James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1997; Solberg, 1990; Harris, 2006). Since parents cannot directly control their children's lives from afar and their caregivers do not control every minute of their lives, these children are able to seek physical and dream spaces where they can exercise a degree of independence and develop their own personalities (Harris, 2006). They make use of their school environment, observe different lifestyles outside of their home, and develop new ideas and dreams for the future as a consequence of their exposure to the internet and television. This can be seen, for instance, in the expressions of Rahima (14, female) and Sabzina (17, female) longing to travel and explore the world, or Anis (17, male) and Rahima (14, female), wanting to have a different job from their parents in the future.

The situation of left behind children has become 'naturalized', although it is not natural. Therefore, when I interviewed these children, it seemed to me that it was the first time that anyone ever asked them about their feelings and understanding of what they are experiencing.

Most of the research in Tajikistan focuses on the economic benefits that migration brings along with it. Of course, one cannot disregard the fact that 50 % of the Tajik GDP is the result of the remittances sent by migrants, which puts Tajikistan on the top among other countries in the world. Yet, this dissertation calls attention to the social costs of such a development. Moreover, it has given an opportunity for the children to voice themselves and explain their understandings and feelings. Consequently, my empirical research reminded them that they are children, something that they don't always remember.

## **6.1 Social services and child protection policies**

Under UNCRC, which was ratified by the Republic of Tajikistan in 1993, the government is obliged to advocate and protect the children from any harm or risk of exploitation. At the same time, it should provide support to the families and parents, and provide alternative care to the children who are deprived of family care (Catrinescu, et al., 2011). Several national legal documents, including the Tajik Constitution (1994) and the Family Code (1999), lay out the policy on child protection and social services (ibid.). Yet, when it comes to the practicality, these documents overlap, lack implementation and are not financed sufficiently. In addition, there is no clarity on which authority is responsible for social services, who develops child protection policies and who implements them, how they interact and work with the people, families and children and who provides services (ibid.).

There are hardly any programmes targeted specifically on left behind children, since in Tajikistan child protection system is mostly dependent on the residential care. There is lack of social work services and Tajikistan needs to put an effort on introducing social work curriculum in the education system and train social workers. Thus, the social protection in Tajikistan should emphasize the importance to:

- Strengthen its protection system to help children who are being exploited and abused. Services should regulate the child labour and monitor different forms of abuse and develop actions upon
- Support caregivers of children in terms of child upbringing responsibilities. Perhaps support some extra-curricular programmes at school that can benefit the child
- Informing the society about the migration and the various forms of changes it creates in the society. Informing about left behind children and the social price they pay by the absence of their parents
- Develop community based services and work with the community to address this phenomenon
- Assist schools in teaching about gender equality and analyzing critically the gender norms in the Tajik community. Because school is a place where children spend half of their day, as well as a place that is connected to parents, caregivers and the community