

# Care, Inequalities and Wellbeing among Transnational Families in Europe

Summary of the CareWell comparative, intergenerational study in Spain, France, Sweden and UK

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

This research project investigated the relationships between care, inequalities and wellbeing among different generations of transnational families in the UK, Spain, France and Sweden. 'Transnational families' can be defined as familial groups where one or more family members spend all or most of their time geographically separated from each other across borders, but nevertheless share a collective sense of connection as a 'family' (Evans, 2025; Baldassar et al., 2007).

European societies are undergoing significant demographic shifts due to population ageing and increased international migration, resulting in major changes in the provision of care, social protection and intergenerational responsibilities. These transformations may exacerbate existing inequalities facing migrant carers. Migrants' social rights in each national context are mediated by varying welfare models and specific migration regimes – immigration and naturalisation policies which regulate entry categories, conditions for settlement and acquisition of citizenship, and immigrant policies that determine the level of access to public services. Different policy scales (local, regional, national and transnational) affect the formal and informal arrangements through which migrants and their transnational families can organise care locally and transnationally. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has brought into stark relief the care deficits many European countries are confronting as ageing societies.

### Methodology

Using a multi-sited, family-focused ethnographic and participatory action research methodology, we worked with partner organisations to train and support migrant peer/community researchers to undertake research with transnational families, building trust and capacity within communities.

We conducted interviews, participatory diagramming and other activities with 122 transnational families (UK: 25, Sweden: 40, Spain: 23, France: 29 families). This provided a total of 319 family participants in the large sample of different ethnicities and varying legal status to compare experiences at urban and rural scales, and between countries. In most families, we engaged with two or three different generations, including members living in countries of origin/other countries. We also selected 20 case study families across the four countries for in-depth research employing ethnographic approaches. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 44 practitioners and policymakers working with migrant families in health and social care, education, integration, language learning, the voluntary and community sector to explore their perspectives.

Audio-recorded interviews/discussions were transcribed and translated where needed into English (UK and Sweden), Swedish, Spanish and French. A thematic and narrative analysis framework was developed. Preliminary findings and policy implications were discussed in a series of participatory feedback workshops with transnational families, peer/ community researchers, policymakers and practitioners. A number of accessible visual and other outputs were co-produced and disseminated with participants and stakeholders, including short films for policymakers and practitioners in the UK and Sweden<sup>2</sup>, documentary films in France, PhotoVoice collages in Spain and learning resources for English for Speakers of Other Languages tutors<sup>3</sup>.

## Key findings

This research has shown that transnational families simultaneously manage multiple caring responsibilities, both proximately for co-resident family members, and by caring at a distance for kin living in other countries. Carers' and their family members' opportunities and access to social protection are shaped by intersecting inequalities based on legal status, nationality, race and ethnicity, disability/ chronic illness, socio-economic status, language-related inequalities, gender and generation. Indeed, the deficits of migration and care regimes, alongside the absence of kin who would usually be expected to provide informal care, create the need for children and youth to take on caring roles in transnational families. Children's and young people's care work is often devalued and invisible, but may be crucial in enabling parents and other family members to fill gaps in care provision in the absence of extended family kin and in facilitating access to formal care resources through language and digital brokering.

Our analysis of the policy context demonstrates that restrictions to accessing welfare and services emerge as an extension of migration control, particularly in the cases of France, Spain and the UK. Across all four countries, however, long-term settlement and 'integration' are undermined for both labour and humanitarian migrants due to the need to meet income or other requirements, and/or limitations of social rights. For families, particularly those with specific care needs, restrictive family reunion and family visit visa policies, particularly in France, Sweden and the UK, jeopardise intergenerational care and reciprocity, undermining the wellbeing of family members both locally and transnationally.

The research took place in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and was able to capture how the physical and mental health, economic, social and emotional impacts of the pandemic were interlinked for migrants. Such impacts contributed to the further marginalisation of transnational families with caring responsibilities, particularly those with insecure legal status and low socio-economic status. Caring arrangements had to change due to enforced immobility, resulting in extended periods of separation when family members became 'stuck' in other countries due to the closure of borders and an inability to travel to see sick or dying relatives or attend funerals which families found distressing.

The accelerated shift towards digital technology becoming the primary gateway to access public services, seen particularly in Spain, the UK and Sweden since the pandemic, has resulted in an additional layer of inequalities. The digital divide particularly affects older generations and those with low levels of literacy or language proficiency in the dominant societal language and increases the reliance on children and younger generations. Children's roles in language brokering and mediating in institutional settings (schools, hospitals) is seen as particularly problematic since it raises ethical questions about consent and confidentiality, as well as concerns about the impact of such responsibilities on children.

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2 See: [CareWell Transnational Families YouTube channel](#)

3 See learning resources on [Transnational Families: Family Challenges](#), produced by Migrant English Support Hub (MESH).

The research has also highlighted several barriers to accessing affordable, appropriate and high-quality language education provision. These include: travel costs, pressure to progress through higher level language courses, inflexible timetables due to stretched resources and ineffective coordination of language education provision.

Negative impacts of caregiving were identified among participants in the key domains of education, employment and finances, family relationships, social participation, health and wellbeing. These negative impacts were mainly experienced by middle and younger generations across the four study countries who were predominantly responsible for caring for family members.

The research in Sweden and the UK found, as might be expected, that negative impacts were particularly experienced by migrants undertaking substantial care work for co-resident family members with a disability and/or chronic illness in destination countries. Negative impacts were also experienced, however, by younger and middle generation migrants in Spain and France juggling care at a distance for family members in other countries, alongside everyday caring roles for family members in close proximity. There were particular pressures on women and primary carers in the middle generation, especially for those balancing remittances and proximate care, and, in the cases of Spain and France, doing so sometimes in very difficult working conditions.

While caring for a family member may foster resilience, such negative impacts of caregiving could have significant implications for transnational family carers' long term opportunities and life chances and individual and collective wellbeing. Our research supports the wider evidence that negative outcomes of caregiving may affect carers' economic, social and cultural rights, education and opportunities, leading to poverty, reduced employment and pension rights (EuroCarers, 2020; APPG on Young Carers and Young Adult Carers, 2023). These impacts of caregiving may be especially acute among transnational families with substantial caring responsibilities who are often already facing financial hardships and insecurity within destination countries. As we have shown, such difficult circumstances are due to limited entitlements to welfare and care resources, difficulties in securing long-term employment, restrictions on mobility through visa policies and family reunification rules, concerns about legal status and language and digital barriers to accessing support.

## Policy and practice recommendations

### 1 Level out inequalities and differential treatment of refugees and other migrants

- based on legal status, arrival and resettlement routes and/or nationality and ethnicity
- allow access to welfare and social protection in both origin and settlement countries, recognising transnational family ties

Differential treatment of migrants according to legal status and nationality results in inequalities in social rights and unequal access to welfare and other forms of social protection within destination countries, as well as between countries in Europe.

Country-specific recommendations follow:

#### Spain:

- Ensure equal citizenship and dual nationality for all migrants; this would allow transnational citizens to exert their political rights in both countries to which they contribute and make it easier for transnational families to access and combine social protection resources from more than one country to meet their care needs.
- Restore universal health assistance to people in irregular legal situations, (abolished by the Government of Mariano Rajoy Popular Party in 2013 but formally overturned by a Royal Decree passed in 2018. In practice, those in irregular situations continue to be excluded).
- Extend the IMV (Minimum Living Income) to include migrants in irregular situations, who are currently excluded.

#### France:

- Ensure undocumented migrants have continued access to healthcare (AME State Medical Aid), which has often become the focus of political debate in the current context and at risk of such basic rights being withdrawn.
- Migrants' families should have access to welfare support in France if they have ties in other countries, such as the current exclusion from welfare benefits (for example, the minimum resource benefit) if the parent spends periods of time abroad where their child lives.
- Social security agreements should be extended to more countries representing migrant workers' countries of origin, such as ensuring access to the total pension amount, based on contributions made in both origin and receiving countries. This is important in protecting transnational families' financial security.
- Greater recognition of migrants' qualifications and diplomas across the origin and receiving contexts is needed, since these influence their social mobility and capacity to integrate in the labour market both 'here' and 'there'.

#### UK:

- Level out the differentiated system of refugees' social rights based on nationality in response to particular crises of displacement. This causes difficulties and confusion for local authority and third sector migrant and refugee organisation staff and volunteers who may have differing funding streams for different groups, which they need to target to meet funding requirements, while also seeking to address inequalities created by different eligibility criteria.
- Reduce the costs of visas and passports for family members.
- Streamline and reduce the processing time of asylum claims, humanitarian resettlement, family reunification and visa applications so that family members are not separated for so long and can fulfil caring obligations.
- Lift the restriction around right to work of asylum seekers.
- Improve official recognition of professional qualifications obtained overseas to enable job-seeking and avoid de-skilling.

- Provide adequate legal representation to asylum seekers and ‘unaccompanied minors’ (unaccompanied child refugees/ migrants).
- Provide long term funding to local authorities and strategic migration partnerships (SMPs) to provide integration support to migrants and resettled groups.
- Ensure fairness and consistency in age assessments of unaccompanied minors.
- Create a culture within government that is more supportive and compassionate towards migrants, not hostile.

### **Sweden:**

Despite the universal model of welfare provision and high Migrant Integration Policy Index score, the research in Sweden found that transnational family members with caring needs and responsibilities often faced inequalities in securing long-term employment, which impacted on their wellbeing and opportunities. Addressing this requires:

- Public employment agencies to be more closely involved in monitoring and evaluating internship programmes to ensure they do not reinforce inequalities in the labour market.
- Subsidising the costs of obtaining a Swedish driving license would make the labour market more accessible for migrants.

## **2 Expand the definition of ‘family’ in reunification policies**

- **facilitate transnational family reunion and mobility across borders for extended family members**
- **fast-track where there are care needs**

Our research has demonstrated the need to expand the definition of ‘family’ in reunification policies and recognise a wider range of family members than just the immediate ‘nuclear’ family, so that migrants could ‘sponsor’ and be reunited with parents, adult siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, grandparents, as well as children aged 18 or over.

We recommend expanding the eligibility criteria and definition of ‘family’ within all types of migration, including resettlement schemes and the asylum system, to include children aged 18 and over, parents, siblings and other extended family members, and fast-tracking applications where there are care needs. These changes would enable such transnational family members to provide culturally appropriate inter- and intra-generational care in response to their needs and is fundamental to their wellbeing.

## **3 Recognise children’s care work in transnational families and address the whole family’s support needs**

- **recognise children’s important roles in language and digital brokering as care work in itself**
- **recognise care work across borders**

This research has provided important evidence of the significant, sometimes substantial, unpaid care work that children and young people provide to support transnational family members who often have multiple care needs and the ways this may impact on their wellbeing, education, social participation and future life chances. More awareness about young caregiving in transnational families is needed among teachers, social workers, healthcare practitioners and other professionals.

Furthermore, children’s important roles in language and digital brokering need to be recognised as care work in itself, since they may be drawn into these roles regardless of whether there are specific disability-related care needs within families. Interpreting in healthcare, social care, educational or legal settings was sometimes stressful for young people and they were concerned about making mistakes or not understanding fully. Children’s language brokering roles also contravene statutory guidelines in the UK for safeguarding children (HM Government, 2023, p.15).

While young carers are recognised as a specific group that may require support in the UK, the majority of the children and young people interviewed with caring responsibilities in transnational families had not been recognised by professionals as young carers and were not accessing support. Our research points to the crucial need for policymakers and practitioners in France, Spain and Sweden to acknowledge the issue of young caregiving and develop strategies to recognise and address the support needs of children and young people caring for family members within transnational families.

The research has shown that a 'whole family' approach to supporting young carers needs to include extended family members, including those not living in the immediate household and recognise how adults and children may be simultaneously caring for other family members in other countries. A more inclusive, flexible approach to the provision of welfare and care resources is needed that recognises transnational family ties and caring obligations across borders and need to travel in the context of global mobility.

#### **4 Make public services more accessible, welcoming and inclusive for migrant carers and their families**

In all four study countries, family participants and practitioners highlighted significant barriers that transnational family members with care needs faced in accessing public services, including healthcare, social care, welfare entitlements, education, including adult language education, housing and other local authority services. Specific issues to address include:

- **improve the accessibility and efficiency of services**
- **address the digital divide**
- **expand interpreting and translation services (taking account of gender sensitivities and language varieties)**
- **provide intercultural training (transnational family ties, culturally appropriate care, forced and irregular migration)**
- **expand and improve the quality of language education**
- **increase long-term funding, collaboration with and support for third sector**

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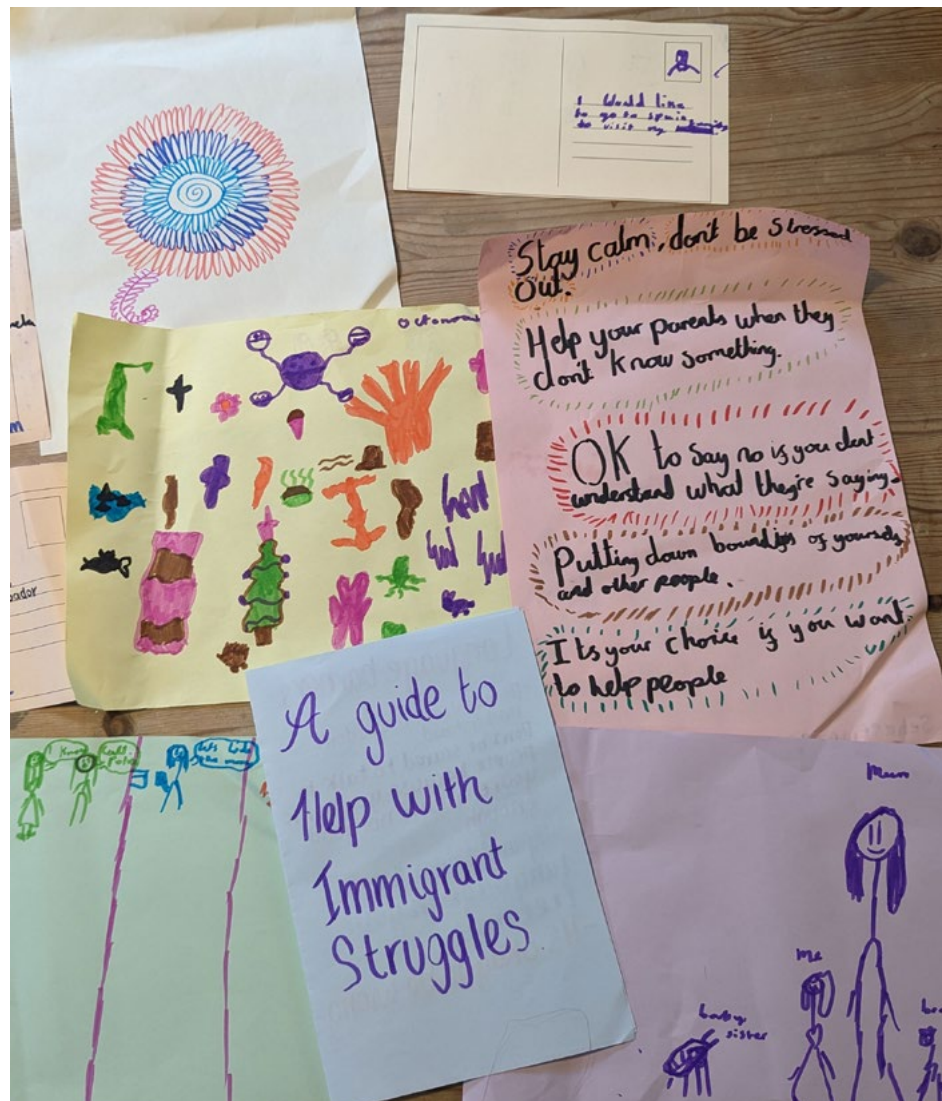
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**Report Authors:** Ruth Evans, Rosa Mas Giralt, Virginie Baby-Collin, Tony Capstick, Assaf Dahdah, Amrita Limbu, Sally Lloyd-Evans, Raquel Martínez-Buján, Paloma Moré, Katarina Mozetič, Laura Oso, Polina Palash, Montserrat Golías Pérez, Ingrid Jerve Ramsøy, James Simpson, Andrea Souto, Laura Suárez-Grimalt, Brigitte Suter, Domiziana Turcatti, Grady Walker

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Photograph of participatory artwork produced by children participating in the research about their caring roles (feedback workshop, Migrant Support, Manchester, UK, 2024).



## Further information

[Download the full report, summary, policy briefs and other resources.](#)

Films are available on the [CareWell YouTube channel](#).

[Learning Resources for ESOL tutors](#) produced by Migrant English Support Hub (MESH).

## Contact:

Ruth Evans, University of Reading, email: [r.evans@reading.ac.uk](mailto:r.evans@reading.ac.uk)

Rosa Mas Giralt, University of Leeds, email: [r.masgiralt@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.masgiralt@leeds.ac.uk)

