

FAMILY DECISION MAKING ABOUT BIRTH REGISTRATION AMONG TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN INDONESIA

Implications for policy and practice

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A study of decision making about birth registration in Indonesian families involved in transnational migration showed strong links between high migration and low birth registration for children of migrants, with negative implications for child statelessness and access to critical social services. The study included 42 individual interviews and seven focus group discussions involving 56 rural youth, parents, and grandparents in the high-migration district of East Lombok, Nusa Tenggara Barat province. Findings highlight the many ways that labour migration affects decisions about birth registration, citizenship, and family belonging for children. These insights expand our understanding of birth registration beyond the usual perspectives of governments, migrant advocates, and service agencies to include the cultural, social and familial experiences and decisions around the birth registration process.

MAIN FINDINGS

All participants expressed awareness of the expectation of birth registration and had received information about the potential benefits of registering their children, but most had decided to put it off indefinitely. Only 12 per cent of interviewees had obtained birth registration for a child - a rate significantly lower than the 33% to 50% claimed for Indonesia as a whole. When birth registration was perceived as important, participants saw it as instrumental for adults to obtain documents for authorized migration or for youth to enroll in secondary school. A few parents indicated they might attempt birth registration if it was required to enroll their child in the local school. Factors contributing to most migrant families' decision to postpone birth registration indefinitely were: (a) the complexity of the birth registration procedure for mobile parents; and (b) the perception that registration is a form of government surveillance that has no tangible benefit for children or families.

Practical barriers included: the need for supporting documents which parents may never have had or which may have been confiscated or lost during migration; the need to have the language and literacy skills and confidence to interact with civil registration officers; the need to pay brokers or village-level assistants for help getting the certificate; fear of fines for delayed registration; apathy due to a perception that other documents, especially the family card (Kartu Keluarga) are more instrumental; and the desire to avoid bringing attention to a child's parentage, especially if the child was conceived or born to a migrant while working overseas. Birth registration was described as particularly onerous for mothers with migrating husbands. These women are often illiterate and confined to the home while their husbands work overseas during their pregnancy and the child's birth and early years. Monies sent home by husbands first go towards paying off debt to labour migration brokers.

Punitive government measures intended to encourage birth registration, including fines for late registration and making protection and services for children contingent upon birth registration, could unwittingly increase de facto statelessness by disenfranchising unregistered children of migrant parents whose lives are already precarious and difficult. This study showed that transnational migration, which is necessary for many families in a region with few local employment opportunities, compounds existing barriers to completing the birth registration process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The civil registration process must take into account migrant families' low resources, high mobility, cultural sensitivities, and competing priorities. To ensure equitable opportunities for birth registration, the application process must be simplified and made more accessible through integration with existing birthing centres, health and social services in rural and remote hamlets, or migration services. The burden of providing supporting parental identity and marriage certificates must be reduced and fines must be lifted. Strategic investment in integrated rural development that provides alternatives to transnational labour migration would increase family cohesion and quality of life, continuous parental involvement, and the ability of parents to secure official identity documentation for their children.

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