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Psychological Risk and Protective Factors among “Left-Behind” Children in The Context of Labor Migration in Uzbekistan: A Systematic Analysis

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Abstract: Labor migration has become a structural socio-economic feature of modern Uzbekistan, resulting in millions of children being raised without the presence of one or both parents. This article provides a systematic analysis of the psychological risk and protective mechanisms for these “left-behind” children (LBC). By synthesizing global attachment theories with local socio-cultural dynamics and UNICEF statistics, the study identifies emotional deprivation as a primary risk factor, while the “extended family” is established as a critical buffer (protector). The findings emphasize the necessity of systemic psychological interventions to support the mental resilience of left-behind children in Central Asia.

Keywords: Labor Migration, Left-Behind Children, Attachment Theory, Resilience, Uzbekistan, Mental Health

Introduction

Labor migration is one of the most complex phenomena defining the global socio-economic landscape of the modern world. According to data from the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of migrants worldwide continues to increase annually, leading not only to economic remittances but also to profound social and psychological transformations [1]. In the Central Asian region, particularly in Uzbekistan, external labor migration has become an integral part of the family institution. Recent statistical indicators confirm that more than 2 million citizens of Uzbekistan are temporarily employed in foreign countries, a process that directly impacts millions of households and the lives of underage children within them [2].

The most vulnerable point of migration processes is the segment known in international terminology as “left-behind children” (LBC)—those whose parents have moved abroad for long-term employment. In Uzbekistan, migration is not merely a tool for ensuring financial stability; it acts as a form of “social surgery” that severs traditional emotional attachment chains between family members [3]. The physical absence of a father, a mother, or both in a child’s developmental trajectory creates a “care vacuum,” obstructing the fulfillment of basic psychological needs [4].

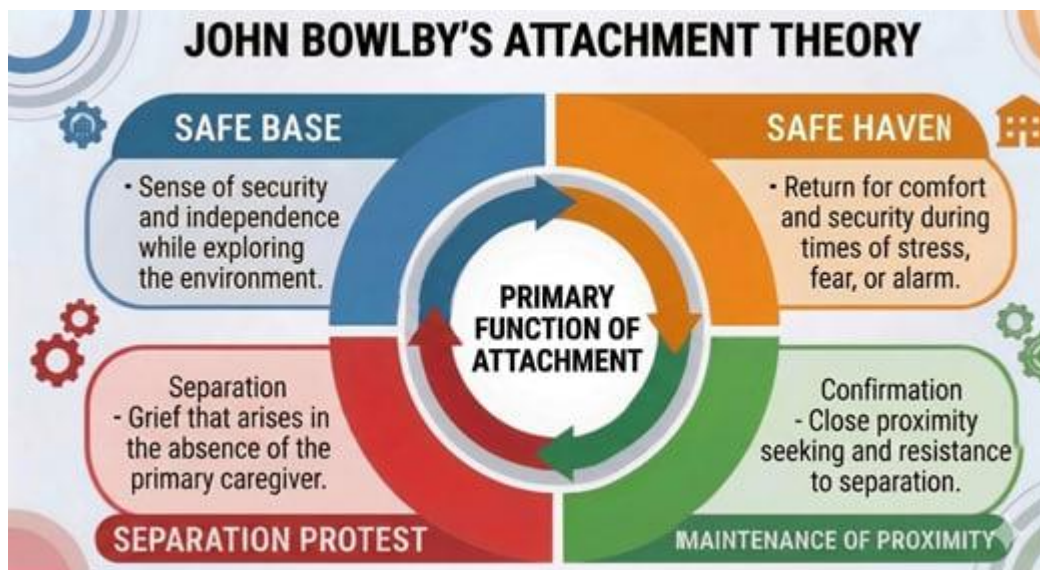
According to the 2024 reports of the Statistics Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan, demographic growth and the movement of labor resources in the country are dynamic, directly influencing the scale of external migration. Current data regarding the number of citizens working abroad and their family status rely on these latest demographic collections [5].

From a psychological perspective, direct communication with parents is of paramount importance in child development. According to John Bowlby's fundamental "Attachment Theory," the disruption of a secure connection with a caregiver creates deep existential anxiety and mistrust toward the world in the child [6]. Nevertheless, the practical application of this theory in the context of Uzbekistan possesses unique characteristics. While international studies often focus on the negative consequences of migration, the "extended family" and *mahalla* institutions in the national context serve as a "buffer" to soften this blow [7]. However, the endurance of these protective mechanisms against the negative impacts of modern globalization and cyberspace has not been sufficiently studied scientifically [8].

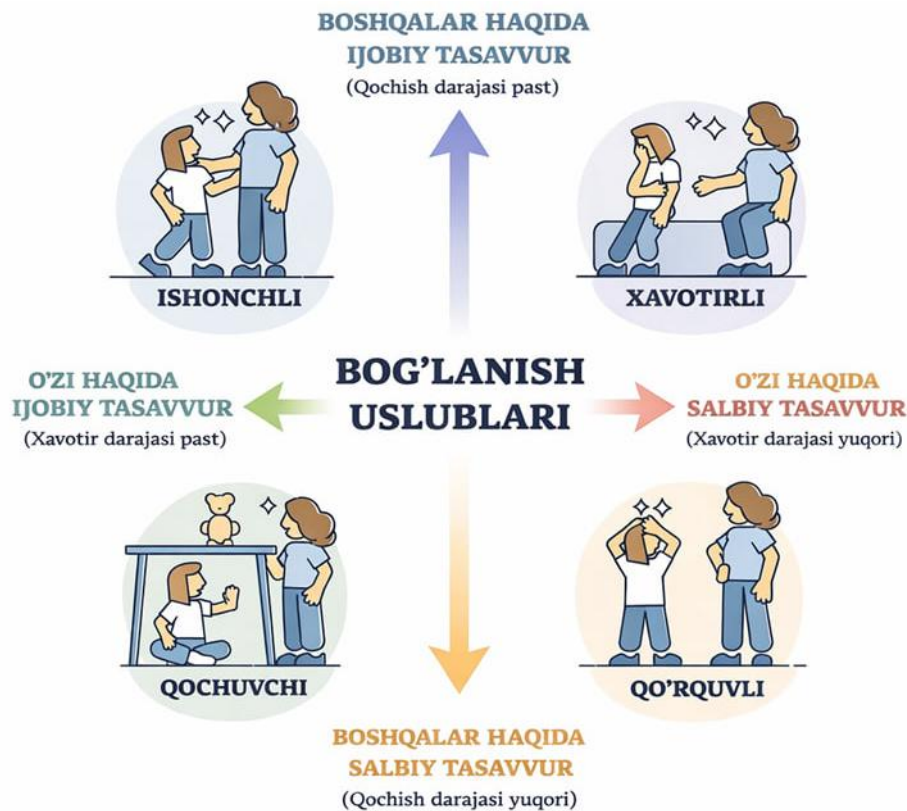
This study theoretically evaluates how the absence of primary caregivers affects the mental well-being of Uzbek children using existing literature and statistical reports. Protecting the mental health of children in the context of migration requires a shift from purely economic analysis to psychological analysis, as well as the strengthening of legal guarantees [9].

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The psychological foundation of this research is based on John Bowlby's "Attachment Theory". According to this theory, a consistent and secure attachment with the primary caregiver is vital for a child's healthy emotional regulation [10].



- **International Context:** Research by S.S. Luthar emphasizes that "Resilience" is not an innate trait but a process managed by protective factors that balance environmental risks.
- **National Context:** Uzbek scholar E.G. Goziyev notes that in local culture, the father's role is the center of social prestige, while the mother's role is the "emotional core" of the family. The absence of either parent triggers specific types of psychological vulnerability [11].



Analysis of Risk Factors

Based on UNICEF data and local psychological observations, several critical risks have been identified:

- **Emotional Deprivation and Anxiety:** Statistics indicate that left-behind children in Uzbekistan experience higher levels of "separation anxiety" compared to peers in intact families [12].
- **Social and Academic Vulnerability:** A 2019 UNICEF report found a decrease in study motivation among children of migrants due to the lack of direct supervision.
- **Criminogenic Risks:** As noted by V.M. Karimov, the absence of a father figure is often associated with an increased risk of deviant behavior among adolescent boys and susceptibility to the influence of negative groups [13].

Protective Factors: Uzbekistan's "Buffer" Model

Despite the risks, many children exhibit high resilience due to cultural protective factors:

- **Extended Family (Kinship Care):** In Uzbekistan, 85% of left-behind children are cared for by grandparents or close relatives. This "extended family" model forms a secondary secure base that satisfies the child's basic need for belonging. The stability of the family institution in society allows for the preservation of the child's spiritual and mental integrity, even during complex processes like migration.
- **The Mahalla System:** The traditional community structure provides an informal layer of social control and support unique to the region.
- **Remittances – A "Double-Edged Sword":** While financial stability improves nutrition and housing conditions, it cannot compensate for the "emotional deficit" caused by physical separation [14].

Discussion and Recommendations

The synthesis of global theories and local data shows that the psychological outcome for left-behind children often depends on the quality of "substitute care."

Recommendations:

1. **Institutionalizing Digital Parenting:** Developing protocols for migrant parents to maintain "active presence" through structured video communication.

2. **School-Based Support:** Training school psychologists to identify "attachment-related depression" and conducting workshops to increase resilience.
3. **Guardianship Reform:** Ensuring every child of a migrant has a legally and psychologically recognized guardian before the parents depart [15].

Conclusion

Protecting children's mental health in the context of migration requires a transition from purely economic analysis to psychological analysis. While the traditional Uzbek family serves as a strong shield, the increasing complexity of social risks necessitates the creation of systemic psychological support mechanisms to ensure the healthy development of the future generation.

The psychological analysis of labor migration processes in Uzbekistan shows that long-term separation from parents is a factor posing a serious risk to a child's emotional development. As identified during the research, negative states such as the disruption of the sense of basic security and separation anxiety are observed in LBC. However, these risks do not lead to destructive results in all cases. The main conclusion of the study is that Uzbekistan's unique socio-cultural environment—specifically the "extended family" and the *mahalla* system—acts as a fundamental "buffer" preserving the child's resilience. These mechanisms minimize the criminogenic and psychophysiological consequences of emotional deprivation by maintaining the child's sense of belonging.

In the conditions of rapid development of modern globalization and digital technologies, traditional protective factors alone are no longer sufficient to ensure the full safety of the child. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out systemic work in several directions. First, within the institutional approach, it is necessary to further improve the national legislative base—specifically guardianship and trusteeship mechanisms—that guarantees the legal and psychological protection of children of migrants. Second, to strengthen the psychological support system, the implementation of a "Socio-Psychological Passport" system, which monitors the individual development trajectory of children in cooperation with school psychologists and community inspectors, will ensure the targeted nature of preventive work. Third, utilizing digital communication, it is urgent to implement state-level programs for developing "Digital Parenting" skills that elevate remote relationships between migrant parents and children to a qualitatively new level.

In conclusion, maintaining the mental health of children in migration conditions is a shared responsibility of not only the family but also the state and society. Future research should rely on direct empirical data and comparative criminological analysis to study this problem even more deeply.

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