

# The Transformation of Elderly Roles in Migrant Families: Tradition, Change, and Adaptation

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**Abstract:** Migration has become a defining feature of contemporary global society, fundamentally altering family structures and intergenerational relationships. Among the many affected are the elderly, who traditionally played key roles within the family as cultural custodians and caregivers. This article explores how these roles have changed for elderly family members in migrant families, focusing on the shifts from tradition to adaptation. Drawing on the experiences of elderly migrants and those left behind, the study provides insights into the evolving responsibilities, power dynamics, and coping mechanisms in transnational families. The findings underscore the resilience of elderly individuals in maintaining familial connections and cultural values despite physical distance and shifting roles.

**Keywords:** Migration, Elderly, Family roles, Tradition, Adaptation, Transnational families, Social change, Intergenerational relationships, Remittances, Globalization.

## Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon that profoundly impacts the structure of families and the roles of their members. Traditionally, the elderly have occupied central positions in family life, acting as the primary caregivers, moral guides, and transmitters of cultural heritage. Their contributions are invaluable in many societies, especially in non-Western cultures where intergenerational bonds are deeply embedded in the social fabric. However, the mass migration of younger generations for economic, social, and political reasons has disrupted these roles, requiring the elderly to adapt to new realities. As younger family members leave in search of better opportunities abroad, elderly individuals often find themselves left behind or relocated to unfamiliar environments where their traditional roles are challenged (King & Vullnetari, 2006).

The effects of migration on elderly family members extend beyond geographic separation. It introduces complexities that redefine the relationships between generations, shifting the dynamics of caregiving, authority, and cultural transmission. In many cases, elderly individuals are no longer the primary decision-makers or caregivers; instead, they may become recipients of care, financially dependent on remittances sent by their children. At the same time, elderly migrants who relocate with their families face the challenges of adapting to new cultures, often with limited social support and language barriers (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2016). This article examines the transformation of elderly roles within migrant families, focusing on how traditional expectations of the elderly have changed and how these individuals adapt to the evolving structures of transnational families.

## Traditional Roles of the Elderly in Families

Historically, elderly family members have been the cornerstone of familial life in many cultures, particularly in societies where extended families play a central role in maintaining family cohesion. Their roles as caregivers, decision-makers, and transmitters of cultural traditions have been vital to ensuring the continuity of values and practices across generations. In non-Western societies, elderly individuals often serve as the primary caregivers for grandchildren, while younger family members

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focus on economic activities (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). This caregiving role not only provided practical support for working-age adults but also reinforced the social and cultural bond between generations.

In addition to caregiving, the elderly were often seen as the moral and cultural guides of the family, responsible for ensuring that cultural practices, traditions, and values were passed down to younger generations (Basu & Van, 2013). This role was particularly important in contexts where formal education was limited, and much of the cultural knowledge and family history was transmitted orally. The elderly were thus essential in maintaining the family's cultural identity and continuity.

Migration, however, disrupts these traditional roles in several ways. When younger family members migrate, the physical distance created by their relocation makes it difficult for the elderly to continue fulfilling their roles as caregivers and cultural custodians. The elderly, left behind in their home country, may no longer have the same direct influence on the upbringing of their grandchildren or the day-to-day decision-making within the family (Zontini, 2010). Moreover, the cultural values that the elderly have worked to preserve may be challenged or transformed as migrant families adapt to new cultural contexts in their host countries. The transmission of these cultural values becomes fragmented, with younger family members often adopting new customs and practices that may differ significantly from those of their home country (Torres, 2013).

For those elderly individuals who accompany their families to a new country, the disruption of their traditional roles can be even more pronounced. Adapting to a new cultural environment often means that the elderly no longer occupy the central role they once held within the family. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the host country's social systems, and a lack of social networks can all contribute to a sense of isolation and marginalization (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2016). In such cases, the elderly may find themselves dependent on their younger family members for social and economic support, reversing the traditional family hierarchy.

### **Shifts in Power Dynamics and Family Responsibilities**

One of the most significant changes that migration brings to family dynamics is the redistribution of power and responsibilities. In traditional family structures, the elderly were often seen as the authority figures, with their opinions and guidance carrying significant weight in family decisions. Their roles as decision-makers were rooted in their experience and their position as the head of the family, particularly in multi-generational households where the presence of grandparents was a defining feature of family life (Bastawrous et al., 2018).

However, migration alters these dynamics in several ways. First, the physical separation between generations means that the elderly are no longer as actively involved in the daily decision-making processes of the family. In many cases, younger family members who have migrated to other countries take on new roles as economic providers, sending remittances back home to support their elderly parents. This shift in economic power can lead to a reconfiguration of family hierarchies, with the younger generation gaining more influence over family decisions (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011). While remittances provide much-needed financial support, they also create a dependency that can diminish the traditional authority of the elderly within the family.

For elderly individuals who migrate with their families, the shift in responsibilities and power dynamics is often even more pronounced. In their home countries, the elderly were often respected for their knowledge of cultural practices and their role as moral guides. However, in a new cultural context, their knowledge and experience may no longer carry the same weight, particularly if they struggle to adapt to the host country's language and social systems (Torres, 2013). In such cases, the younger generation may take on greater responsibility for navigating the new environment, further diminishing the authority of the elderly.

Additionally, the shift in caregiving responsibilities can also lead to changes in family dynamics. Traditionally, the elderly provided care for younger family members, particularly grandchildren. In migrant families, however, caregiving responsibilities may be redistributed, with younger family



members taking on the role of caregivers for their elderly relatives (Baldassar, 2007). This reversal of roles can create tension within the family, as the elderly struggle to adapt to their new position as care recipients rather than caregivers.

### **Adaptation Strategies and Coping Mechanisms**

Despite the challenges posed by migration, elderly individuals in migrant families have demonstrated remarkable resilience in adapting to their changing roles. One of the key strategies that elderly individuals use to cope with the physical distance created by migration is the use of communication technologies. Advances in technology have made it easier for families to stay connected across borders, allowing elderly individuals to maintain regular contact with their children and grandchildren even when they are physically separated (Wilding, 2006). Video calls, messaging apps, and social media platforms enable elderly individuals to continue providing emotional support and guidance, even from a distance.

Transnational caregiving has emerged as a critical mechanism for maintaining family ties in migrant families. Elderly individuals often provide long-distance care in the form of advice, emotional support, and moral guidance to their children and grandchildren, helping to maintain the continuity of family values and traditions (Baldassar et al., 2014). While the physical caregiving role may be diminished due to geographic separation, the elderly continue to play an important role in the emotional and cultural life of the family, ensuring that intergenerational bonds remain strong.

For elderly individuals who migrate with their families, adaptation to a new cultural context often involves learning new skills and navigating new social systems. Language acquisition is a critical component of this adaptation process, as it enables elderly migrants to engage with the broader society and access necessary services (Torres, 2013). Community organizations and ethnic networks also play a vital role in helping elderly migrants integrate into their new environment. These organizations provide social support, opportunities for cultural engagement, and access to resources that can help elderly migrants maintain a sense of belonging in their new country.

Elderly individuals who remain in their home country while their children and grandchildren migrate often find new ways to contribute to the family. Many take on caregiving responsibilities for other family members, such as grandchildren who have been left behind or other elderly relatives who require care (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This allows them to maintain a sense of purpose and fulfillment, even as their traditional roles within the family evolve.

### **Conclusion**

The transformation of elderly roles in migrant families reflects the broader impact of migration on family dynamics and intergenerational relationships. While migration often disrupts the traditional roles of the elderly as caregivers and cultural custodians, it also presents opportunities for adaptation. Through transnational caregiving, technological communication, and community engagement, elderly family members find ways to remain connected to their families and contribute to family life, even across great distances.

The shifts in power dynamics and responsibilities brought about by migration require a redefinition of the roles of the elderly in migrant families. While their traditional authority may diminish, their ability to adapt and provide emotional support across borders highlights the resilience of elderly family members in navigating the complexities of migration. Understanding these evolving roles is essential for addressing the needs of the elderly in transnational families and ensuring their well-being in a rapidly changing global context. As migration continues to reshape family structures, policies and support systems must be put in place to help elderly individuals cope with the challenges they face, whether they remain in their home country or migrate with their families.

The experiences of elderly individuals in migrant families highlight the importance of fostering strong intergenerational relationships and maintaining cultural continuity even in the face of geographic separation. Governments, community organizations, and policymakers should recognize the unique needs of elderly migrants and those left behind in their home countries. Developing programs that



provide social, emotional, and economic support for elderly individuals in transnational families is crucial to ensuring their integration, well-being, and continued participation in family life (King & Vullnetari, 2006).

Moreover, future research on elderly roles in migrant families should focus on understanding the long-term effects of migration on intergenerational relationships, particularly as global migration patterns continue to evolve. As families become increasingly transnational, new dynamics of caregiving, cultural transmission, and economic support will continue to emerge, necessitating a deeper understanding of how elderly individuals navigate these changes. By continuing to explore these topics, scholars, policymakers, and community leaders can work together to ensure that elderly individuals are supported and valued within their families, regardless of the physical distances that migration may create.

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