

An Analysis upon Life Experiences and Association among Husbands' Migration and Left behind Wives': A Case Study of Rural India

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Abstract – *This paper examines the impact of husband's migration on lives of women left behind. We focus on two dimensions of women's lives: (a) Women's autonomy and control over their lives; (b) Women's labor force participation. Results suggest that household structure forms the key mediating factor through which husband's absence affects women. Women not residing in extended families are faced with both higher levels of responsibilities as well as greater autonomy, while women who live in extended households do not experience these demands or benefits.*

Research emphasizing effects of migration on left behind families often focus on implications of absent fathers, particularly in rural India and areas with historic male migration. Yet, information on the experiences of left behind wives in a patriarchal and familial setting is scanty. This Study explore the socio-cultural challenges facing wives of migrants, in rural India. Specifically it examines the stigmatized experiences and the effect of cultural constrains on women adjustment to life in the absence of their husbands.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on migration has increasingly focused on women migrants (Bilsborrow 1992) and has also recognized the gendered nature of the migration process (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Lutz 2002; Morokvasic 2004; Shah 2004). However, surprisingly little attention is directed to women who are not migrants themselves but are deeply affected by the migration process, i.e. women whose husbands have migrated in search of work leaving them behind (Hugo 2000), a gap this paper seeks to fill.

Unlike other demographic phenomena such as birth and death, migration is a process rather than an event. Diversity seems to be the norm when it comes to characterizing migration with respect to reasons for departure, length of migration, frequency of return to place of origin and ties to home communities.

Nevertheless, a common pattern characterizing migration of men in developing countries is that they leave their wives and children in place of origin while they migrate in search of work. For instance, a "well-documented strategy" among Mexican rural households is for the men to migrate in search of employment while their families remain in the places of origin. U.S.

immigration policies have supported and strengthened this form of migration through provisions that make it easier for women to legally migrate as spouse of male migrants but until 1952, women could not legally sponsor their husbands as migrants. Rotation system or the guest worker immigration policy that has been adopted in post war Western Europe also encourages this pattern of solo male migration. This policy is tailored to meet short term demand for labor, with single males rather than entire families being given temporary work permits which are renewed annually. When economic conditions change and the services of the immigrant work force are no longer required, the work visas are not renewed with the hope that these immigrants return to their native countries (Laczko 2002).

State policies may also encourage solo male migration within the country. An example of this is apartheid which resulted in the influx of male mine workers who were prohibited from bringing their families with them. At other times, irregularity of work in urban areas, urban housing shortages or the need for farm labor separates the families (de Haan 2006). While sole female migration is increasing, particularly for specific occupations such as nurses or domestic workers, it appears that human capital, family

responsibilities as well as gender roles will continue to ensure that labor migration would remain dominated by male migration in years to come.

In this study we examine the associated socio-cultural challenges of left behind wives in their role as household heads in a patriarchal society, among the Binis, in rural India. Most research that focus on migration among the Binis, are often towards female prostitution, sex and child trafficking, and migration cartel (Okonofua et al. 2004; Skilbrei & Tveit 2007). Media hype catches in on this, but the life of left behinds wives caught in the complex web of migration hardly gets the academic attention it deserves. Much of the available literatures on left behind wives are in Asia and South America particularly on the adverse effect on children's education, economic difficulties, challenges and adjustment in the absence of their husbands (Desai & Banerji 2008; Hoang & Yeoh 2011).

Research emphasising the effects of migration on left behind families has primarily focused on the implications of absent fathers on children, particularly in rural India with historically-entrenched male migration systems (Reed, et. al. 2010). Similarly in Indian migration research, little attention has been given to left behind wives, especially in communities that are highly traditional and patriarchal in nature. The Binis in India, have a dated history of male migration prior to colonial times and a social organization that is highly patriarchal (Omorodion 2011). With the dominance of men in migration statistics, women and by implication wives, are left behind intentionally and circumstantially in many communities. In some communities in India, there are evidences showing the economic empowerment of women and wives of migrants. For instance in Benin, the impact of migration on women changing status, was evident in the number of female headed households and landladies emerging in the 21st century (Osezua 2013). The snowballing effect of male migration on women socio-economic empowerment cannot be overemphasized, most especially of left behind wives. Often times the economic gains and empowerment of women through migrant remittances come with some prospects as well as challenges.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1999) and Hugo (2000) documented two types of effects male migration has on left behind wives: the first being on women's autonomy and the second which revolves around financial hardship and increased responsibilities. In a study in India, Desai & Banerji (2008) noted that men's absence from home, irregular and meagre remittances provides conditions for fostering women's autonomy, self-esteem and role expansion. In some difficult instances, women engage in tasks that they would not have otherwise done. Nevertheless economic freedom and participation of women in decision making in traditional societies are gradually changing for the better in communities with long history of male migration. Among the Binis as with many patriarchal societies, gender relations varies

among societies, but the general trend is for women to have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal and limited influence over the decision making processes that shape their societies and their own lives. Gender, like race or ethnicity, functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meanings assigned to being male or female.

Recognizing the stigma and challenges of left behind wives is paramount in understanding the level of constraints they face in the drive towards better life. Connell (1987) argues that gender relations are organized by gender structures such as those of labour and power especially in different spheres such as work, home, and community. Similarly Adams & Coltrane (2005), Taga (2005) echo the unwritten and enduring gender boundary between public and domestic spheres occupied by men and women respectively in many societies. In India, the male dominance in migration studies and gendered division of labour that attaches the breadwinners' role to men, and the caregivers' and nurturers' roles to women continues to shape perceptions and gendered spheres in powerful ways. Given the diversity of migratory phenomena and the unavoidable limitations of any explanation confined primarily to economic factors this article incorporates both economic and non-economic elements towards the analysis of qualitative data from women with migrant husbands, living in Benin. This article emphasizes particularly a number of "sociocultural" factors, funneling women into a fairly narrow range of stigmatized roles and statuses in an urban, but cultural milieu. However, it is important to note that 'sociocultural' factors, as used in this article, are not thus opposed to economic factors, but rather relate to the kinds of attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions associated with culture.

MIGRATION OF LABOUR AND LEFT-BEHIND WOMEN

Adult male rural out-migrants are an important labour group in all the urban areas in India. Many of them live in the urban destinations as singles leaving their wives, children and parents in the native places. They maintain links with their kith and kin left behind through visits, communications and remittances. Such links are important threads although they are not enough compensation for the emotional deficiency and care vacuum created by their absence for those left behind. Adult male migration from the rural areas may make heavy demand on women who are left behind and are required to shoulder all household responsibilities and production activities. One should no doubt appreciate the increasing role of women in decision making and the resultant women empowerment in migrant households but at the same time the mounting pressure of such responsibilities and the forced work they have to do in agriculture and elsewhere should not be lost sight of. Both women and children may face tighter time

schedules and the probability of having children to work rather than to read may increase with migration.

The issue of men's migration and the resultant impact on their non-migrating wives has received considerable research attention in the recent years. Broadly speaking, consequent upon the migration of male members, females enjoy higher autonomy and act independently in taking different important decisions in the households (Ennaji and Sidiqui 2004; Manjivor and Agadjanian, 2007) including long term decisions of children's education and they enjoy greater physical mobility and freedom than women living with their husbands. In fact, migration has a substantial effect on women's lives if they do not live in an extended household (Desai and Banerjee, 2008). Their freedom, autonomy and decision making power are greater in nuclear families.

In rural settings, left-behind women take a primary role in important agricultural decisions (Bohen, 2008); they are de facto household heads and execute various responsibilities such as hiring and supervision of agricultural labour and in some cases they have emerged as the bread earner in addition to increased familial and domestic responsibilities. Men's migration increases the female autonomy by promoting the wives' labour force participation compared to the wives of non-migrants. A study in the Sanfransisco Bay area of Mexico has shown that the migration of men typically entails expansion of their wives' acquisition of skills in tasks not traditionally undertaken by women. Husbands' absence forces/frees wives to take on roles that they would not normally undertake.

There are also some negative impacts on left-behind women due to male migration which are worth noting. Women have to bear higher strain and stress due to increased management responsibilities the strain being the greatest for woman whose husband stays away the longest. Untold economic difficulty is imposed on the women when the migrant did not find any job at the destination area. Migration also imposed increased economic burden on the women when remittances sent by the migrants are limited and irregular and in some cases the work load on them increases to compensate for the migrant's farm labour.

RURAL WOMEN, LEFT BEHIND FOR MALE LABOUR CIRCULATION

Requirement of basic needs like food, shelter and clothing, have compelled human being to move one place to another throughout the year since their origin. Such movement of human being is dynamic and complex social process encompassing a broad flexible scale for its varying types, patterns, natures and causes. This process of movement of humans is generally referred in terms of Migration, which has various shade

of meaning. The concept of circulation as defined by Zelensky (1971), is a typical pattern of migration and according to him, it refers to a great variety of movements usually short term, repetitive or cyclical in character, but all having common lack of any declared intention of a permanent or longstanding changes of residence. Labour Circulation thus may be defined as a pattern of circulatory migration where individual or a group of people move away from their home to other places in search of work, then return to the place of origin over the courses of time. In the present paper, 'Male labour circulation' refers agricultural male labourer, who are the head of their family. Status of agricultural labour of the study area is associated with irregular employment due to seasonal character of agriculture of this region, over time of work, low wages and marginalization. Shankar in 1993 observed that 42% agricultural labour of the study area have no land and land possessed by the remaining portion is very poor (Som, 2001).

Male labour circulation from the study area has been altering the entire social and economic circumstances to a large extent. It is a matter of concern to social scientist that, the extent of such circulation is not recorded in the census or in the National Sample Survey, even not by any Government official, elected persons or by Panchayats. Although, women contribute half in the history of human civilization, men always label their supremacy in the forehead of women. Human rights of women have been snatching away and they have been tended to be imprisoned within the barriers of familial activities, norms, rules and regulation throughout the history of human civilization. Casually, wives of absentee husband who are circulated in search of work, have an opportunity to be the de facto head of the family (FAO, 1999). Consequently, male labour circulation has much importance in the life of rural women who left behind at home in the study area.

ASSOCIATION AMONG HUSBANDS' MIGRATION AND LEFT BEHIND WIVES'

Most aspects of human behaviour, including migratory behaviour, are both response to feelings and an exercise of independent wills. People migrate to other places in search of employment or to enhance their economic position further. This entails them sometimes to leave behind their families due to problems of acquiring accommodation adequate for their families or due to other intervening obstacles. 'Leaving behind' often entails emotional and psychological struggles as well as complex rearrangements of material aspects of daily life of a magnitude as significant as 'moving to' and 'settling in place of destination' (Toyota et al., 2007). Not enough is known, both theoretically and empirically, as to whether or not the left behind are particularly

vulnerable and how, when and under what circumstances they benefit and/or suffer from migration of their household members (Nguyen et al., 2006). However, the seriousness of their problems and policies which might possibly assuage them can be discussed only if reliable information on adequate scale is available.

It cannot be disputed that absence of the migrant from the household, especially if he is a family head, can have serious implication for the left behind women, both socially and economically. There is, however, diverse view regarding the change of women's position in the family due to male out-migration. On one hand it is believed that women get more authority and power in decision-making whereas on the other hand, it is accepted that male migration do not substantially change women's decision-making power in the place of origin.

Varying access to resources is one factor that can determine how well left behind women cope with the absence of their husbands. Women are generally left behind in charge of their families. They have to take care of their children and the elderly people in the family. Specifically it can be said that they are the axis around whom the well-being of the family is centered. This may lead to a more permanent change such that women become more autonomous and are more involved than before in decision-making within the family. The sociological implications of this growing matri-weighted phenomenon are many: women have more authority, influence and responsibility than their husbands in local, domestic and village affairs. Women not only have to enter spheres of activities which used to be the male prerogative but also extend and change the nature of the social network of which they are part (Rahat, 1990). Hence, male out-migration leads to greater responsibilities and increased workload for left behind women.

Migration has resulted in an improvement in the economic and social situation of women within the family and the community. While male relatives remaining in the village may retain overall control, male labour migration has led to an improvement in the status of left behind women. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that male out-migration presents opportunities for women to take on new tasks and learn new skills, which can transform gender relations and improve women's status and empowerment. On the other hand, it is quite possible that the presumed change of women's role is only temporary and a reflection of the changed conditions in which they are forced to live (Toyota et al., 2007).

The 'left behind' is not only a relatively new subject for investigation, but more importantly, by bringing the left behind closer to centre stage in migration research, new insights on migration and broader social change can be

addressed. Hence, more focus is needed in this section of left behind population as they are the most disempowered groups in less developed countries, yet gain little attention. Indeed, given the focus on migrants and the narrow ways in which migration processes have been defined, the migration literature can be said to have thus far 'left behind' the 'left behind'.

SOLO MALE MIGRATION AND LEFT BEHIND WOMEN'S LIVES IN INDIA

It would be reasonable to expect that absence of husbands has a deep impact on the way women's lives are shaped. In an Indian context, two areas seem to be particularly affected:

- (1) A variety of studies of women's empowerment in India have noted limited autonomy and decision making ability on the part of women (Bloom, Wypij and das Gupta 2001). We expect that in husband's absence women may have a greater role in family decision making and may be able to put aside norms of female seclusion since husband's absence would increase the need for their participation and leadership in day to day affairs of the family. Moreover, migration may introduce new ideas and attitudes in men which may ultimately change gender roles in the family.
- (2) While male migration may be associated with higher likelihood of remittances, women may need to fill in for absent husbands in many ways including care of animals, and work on family farm or in family business. Moreover, in some instances sporadic nature of remittance may also force women to generate cash income through wage work.

We suggest that living arrangements form the sieve through which migration experience is filtered. Some women establish or maintain their own households and gain increased autonomy as well as responsibility. Others live with extended family and are subject to strict supervision and regulation and must cope without help from their husbands mediating between them and the extended households.

While extended family living remains prevalent in India and in our survey over 90% women started out their married life by residing with husband's parents, over time families frequently divide, particularly as children are born and parents pass away. In India Human Development Survey, nearly half the households are nuclear, the rest are extended. However, it is considered unusual for women to live alone and husband's migration may be feasible only if young women are able to live with other family members (de Haan 2006). Moreover, it would not be

acceptable for a young woman to live alone with older male relatives of her husband; chaperonage of a female relative would be required. Thus, we argue that gender impact of male migration on women is moderated via household structure with greater freedom in households where no older woman is present.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that there is a mixed relationship between husbands' migration and socio-economic protection of women, as well as the cultural discrepancies and discriminatory experiences of wives left behind in specific situations. As narrated and observed migrants' wives are faced with a lot of socio-cultural challenges imposed on them most especially by their in-laws. Though respondents appreciated the familial and economic supports rendered, but often than not the over protection and excessive surveillance placed on them were issues of major concern which restrict wives agency in many ways, such as household decision making and freedom to engage in productive activities outside the home. Where they do, many are often stigmatized and alleged as unfaithful in their marital commitments. Further these narratives were strongly influenced by cultural beliefs and norms which particularly see women (in this case left behind wives) as the property of the in-laws.

In spite of the caveats noted above, a focus on broad patterns using large sample surveys serves an important function. Social science models are consistently being challenged by exceptional circumstances and are being modified in response. Research on separate finances for men and women in India led to criticism of neo-classical household economic models and their assumption that interests of different individuals in the household can be pooled within a single utility function. This resulted in reformulations focusing on intra household distribution considerations. Similarly, focus on female headed households in the United States and Latin America led to a need to move beyond research on male breadwinners and to explicitly pay attention to the nature of women's work as well as a redefinition of the concept of "household headship" in census and other data collection efforts. Results presented in this paper also have considerable implications for research on the nature of gender and patriarchy in developing countries. It highlights the need to focus on the mediating role of household structures and household members other than the husband in limiting the degree of autonomy and agency of young women.

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