



Effects of Husband out Migration on Psychological Well-Being of Left Behind Wives: An Empirical Study of Rural West Bengal

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Abstract:

The study aims to analyse the effect of out migration of husbands on psychological well-being of left behind wives. A sample of 400 wives are collected by structured schedule and in-depth interview method between 18-40 years who were selected by snowball sampling technique. Socio-economic variables selected were family type, head of the family, duration of migration of husband, duration of receiving remittances and dependency on remittances. The indicators to assess psychological well-being are decision making of the left behind wives, life satisfaction, mobility and social relations, psychological problems and family responsibility. One way ANOVA and independent sample t-test have been conducted to determine difference of socio-economic variables on psychological wellbeing and difference in psychological indicators those were influenced by husbands' migration. The study results age group is the most important variable to assess psychological well-being followed by family type, dependency level on remittances and duration of migration. Among psychological indicators decision making of the left behind wives has the most significant influence on their psychological well-being followed by their life satisfaction, mobility and social relations, psychological problems and family responsibility. The qualitative analysis support the variation in level of psychological wellbeing among the socio-economic variables.

Keywords: Left behind wives, Husband out migration, Psychological well-being, Decision making, Qualitative study.

Introduction:

Male out migration in rural West Bengal is a common phenomenon now-a-days. West Bengal, state of India is characterised by monsoon dependent agricultural system and seasonal agricultural unemployment in rural areas.

The situation provokes rural male to work outside their native place and engage themselves in any kind of secondary or tertiary activities to mitigate their family needs. A very common feature of these rural migrated male is they left their families at their native villages (Zachariah et al., 2003). These left behind families particularly their wives draw a very little attention in the field of research since 1980's (Sekher, 1997). The outcome of only male outmigration is both positive and negative. One positive outcome is obviously the flow of remittances they get to prosper their family and another is transformation of these womenfolk from modest housewives to house managers henceforth, they become more independent as well as self-reliant (Gulati, 1993). Alongside of these positive effects the negative outcomes are, long-time suffering from distress caused by anxieties, workload and conflicts faced by left behind wives (Roy, 2011). Although they receive remittances but in most cases expenditure is controlled from long distance by their migrated husbands (Arokkiaraj, et.al. 2021). They have to adjust with their changing family structure in absence of their husband, their relation and interaction with the other family members also (Zachariah & Rajan, 2012). It is observed that long time effect of male migration is not uniform all over, there is difference in growing mental illness or well-being among these left behind wives.

The present study focusing on left-behind wives in Rural West Bengal has been, therefore, undertaken to measure the extent and difference of psychological issues faced by left behind wives due to male migration.

Objective of the study

To examine the impact of male outmigration on psychological well-being of left behind wives and its differences due to their age-groups, duration of migration, household headship, duration of sending remittances, type of their family and engagement of these wives in any kind of economic activities.

Sampling Design & Method

For the present study nearly one and half year an intensive fieldwork and study has been conducted between 2019 and 2021 among the women whose spouses migrated from Cooch Behar to different states of India specially in Rajasthan Gujrat, Delhi, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Assam. Most of them are engaged in construction work and very few of them engaged in driving, tailoring or factory works. At the time of data collection there was no official published data. After consulting District Census Handbook (2011) the villages were selected from each block by systematic random sampling technique and size of the sample to be interviewed has been determined by Cochran's Alpha formula based on total numbers of rural female population of the district as per Census of India. Snow ball

sampling technique was implied to identify the left behind wives. The obtained sample size for the study is 400 rural lefts behind wives between the ages of 19 – 40 years belonging to different family type, head of the family, duration of migration of husband, duration of receiving remittances and dependency on remittances. A well-structured schedule comprising five indicators and 17 items with six socio-economic variables has been used to get data and information from the selected samples. Reliability test of these 17 items has been done and the Cronbach's Alpha value (0.621) which has been found acceptable (Taber, 2018). The psychological wellbeing of these wives has been quantitatively measured.

Psychological Wellbeing Index (PSWBI) has been calculated depending on 17 items among them eleven were measured in a five-point Likert Scale (never=1 and always=5) and six were reversed as (never = 5 and always = 1). The score of PSWBI is considered as dependent variable and socio-economic factors as independent variables. At the stage of analysis, the psychological variables were categorized as low, medium and high. Data analysis and interpretation highlights how all the independent social, demographic and psychological influence PSWBI of left behind wives. The quantitative results were obtained by using inferential statistics like t-test and ANOVA.

$$\text{PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING INDEX (PSWBI)} = \frac{1}{5} \sum_{p=1}^5 w_p x_p$$

$$= w_1 * x_1 + w_2 * x_2 + w_3 * x_3 + w_4 * x_4 + w_5 * x_5$$

Where, w_1, w_2, \dots, w_5 are the Weightage of the indicators (equal weightage considered)

And x_1 = Increase in family responsibility,

x_2 = Improvement in decision making,

x_3 = Improvement in empowerment,

x_4 = Improvement in Life Satisfaction,

x_5 = Increase in Life Dissatisfaction.

For qualitative measure in-depth interviews of the respondents were carried as case studies. The common themes were identified by reading the transcripts and their difference feelings of psychological issues were examined based on their age, type of family, duration of migration etc. The names and the identities of the respondents have been changed for confidentiality and protection of privacy.

Result:***Profile of the left behind wives:***

From Table 1 it can be seen that more than half of the respondents are elder wives ages above 35 years (53.8%); 24.3% are middle aged wives 27-35 years and 22% are young wives 18-26 years. In the district half of the respondents 50.3% lived in nuclear family structure. Semi- Joint family structure was seen among 30.3% of the respondents while a very few 17.5% of the respondents belong to Joint family structure. More than half of the families were headed by wives (56.6%) followed by others 43.8%. More than half of the respondents (52.5%) husband stay away from home for more than ten months for years or two at a time and 47.5% respondent's husband stayed for only 6 months. They returned to their home during agricultural season engage in agricultural works and after end of the season they again engage in other than agricultural activities and migrate from their villages. Most of the left behind wives receives remittances regularly at monthly interval (49.3%) followed by 27%, 21% and 2.8% who receives remittances after six months, whenever needed and never respectively. Most of the respondents 56.5% are not engaged in any kind of paid works and fully dependent on remittances. 38.8% of the respondents are partially dependent on remittances and engaged in any kind of temporary paid works and only 2.8% of the respondents do not depend on remittances at all they have alternate source of income in their family.

Table 1: Profile of the left behind wives:

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age group		
Young wives (18-26yrs)	88	22.0
Middle aged wives (27-35 yrs)	97	24.3
Elder wives (>35 yrs)	215	53.8
Type of Family		
Large Family (>6)	70	17.5
Medium family (4-6)	129	32.3
Small Family (<=3)	201	50.3
Head of the family in husband's absence		
Own (respondent)	173	43.3
Others	227	56.8
Duration of migration of husband		
Less than 6 months	136	27.0
6-10 months	156	39.0
More than 10 months	108	34.0
Duration of receiving remittances		
Never	11	2.8
When needed	84	21.0
After 6 months	108	27.0
Every month	197	49.3
Dependency on remittances		
Partial	155	38.8

Full	226	56.5
Not dependent	19	4.8

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Socio-economic variables and PSWBI of left behind wives:

To examine variation of psychological well-being among left behind wives of different age group, family type, duration of migration, duration of sending remittances, dependency on remittances etc. One way ANOVA and independent sample t-test has been conducted.

Table 2: Difference of PSWBI among Socio-Economic Variables of Left-Behind Wives

Variable	Mean	SD	F-Value	Sig
Age Group				
18 to 26 years of age	2.9979	0.45188	F (2,397) =34.782	0.000
27 to 35 years of age	2.9966	0.33012		
More than 35 years of age	2.6688	0.39265		
Type of Family				
large family	2.7612	0.37273	F (2,397) =7.927	0.000
Semi-large family	2.7255	0.37553		
Small family	2.9025	0.45578		
Dependency on remittances				
Fully dependent	2.7904	0.40764	F (2,397) =3.685	0.026
Partially dependent	2.8357	0.44950		
Not dependent	3.0579	0.34419		
Duration of Migration				
Less than 6 months	2.7465	0.39565	F(2,397)=2.366	0.095
6-10 months	2.8382	0.45114		
More than 10 months	2.8594	0.41099		

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The one way ANOVA result indicates that age group ($F(2,397) = 34.782$) is the most effective variable that influence the psychological well-being (Table 2) of the left behind women of the study area, followed by family type ($F(2,397) = 7.927$), dependency on remittances ($F(2,397) = 3.685$) and duration of migration ($F(2,397) = 2.366$).

Wives have been divided into three age groups according to their age (young, middle and elder) and revealed that there is statistically significant difference ($p = 0.000 < 0.001$) in psychological wellbeing among these three groups. It is also evident that young wives (18-26yrs) (Mean=2.9979) are more psychologically well-being than middle aged (Mean=2.9966) or elder wives (Mean=2.6688) (Table 2).

There is a statistically significant difference in psychological well-being ($p=0.000<0.001$) can be observed among the wives of different family groups. Wives belong to small (Mean =2.9025) family are more psychologically well-being than medium (Mean = 2.7255) or large family (Mean= 2.7612) (Table 2).

The left behind women of the study area have been categorised into three groups on the basis of dependency on remittance i.e., Full dependency, Partial Dependency and Not Dependent. These groups are also varied significantly ($p=0.026<0.05$). The wives who are not dependent of remittance (Mean=3.0579) are more psychologically well-being than partial (Mean= 2.8357) or full dependent (Mean=2.7904) on remittance (Table 2).

As per the duration of husband's out migration the left behind women is classified into three groups i.e., less than 6 months of migration, 6-10 months of migration and more than 10 months of migration and there is a statistically significant difference is perceived in psychological well-being among these groups ($p=0.095<0.10$). The result reflects that the wife of short period of migrants (< 6 months) are psychologically less wellbeing (Mean=2.7465) than long period migrants i.e. 6 to 10 months (Mean=2.8382) or more than ten months (Mean=2.8594) (Table2). The independent sample t-test result of family headship in absence of husband shows a significant difference in psychological well-being between the respondent herself and other members such as father-in-law or mother-in-law ($t(391.436) = 4.683, p=0.000<0.01$) (Table3). The wives (respondent) of the migrated men as head of the family (Mean = 2.9037) seems more psychologically well-being instead of other members (Mean = 2.7117) as head of the family.

Table 3: Difference of PSWBI between Headships of the Family in Husbands' Absence

Variable	Mean	SD	t-Value	Sig
Head of the family in husbands' absence				
Self	2.9037	0.43861	$t(391.436)=4.594$	0.000
Others	2.7117	0.38008		

Source: Field survey, 2019.

Psychological Factors of PSWBI of left behind wives:

The result indicates that decision making of the left behind wives has the most significant ($F(2,397)=140.687, p<0.05$) influence on their psychological well-being followed by their life satisfaction ($F(2,397)=99.363, p<0.05$) mobility and social relations ($F(2,397)=58.945, p<0.05$) psychological problems ($F(2,397)=43.635, p<0.05$) and family responsibility ($F(2,397)=31.678, p<0.05$) (Table 4). All of these five factors are grouped as high, moderate and low.

It is evident from (Table 4) that the wives who enjoy higher decision-making power in absence of their husband (Mean=3.2397) are more psychologically well-being rather than the wives having medium (Mean=2.9656) and low decision-making power (Mean=2.5825).

The left behind wives with high life satisfaction (Mean=3.2268) are more psychologically well-being compared to medium (Mean=2.9619) and low (Mean= 2.5989) level of life satisfaction.

In case of mobility and social relations, the wives with higher mobility and social relation (Mean=3.1792) are more psychologically well-being than the wives of medium (Mean=2.8951) and low level of mobility and social relation (Mean=2.6130).

The left behind wives with low level of psychological problems (Mean=3.1398) are more psychologically well-being than the women with medium (Mean=2.9438) and high (Mean=2.6391) psychological problems.

Wives with low family responsibility (Mean=3.0186) are more psychologically well-being than the wives with medium (Mean=2.9262) and high (Mean=2.6356) family responsibility.

Table 4: Difference among Levels of Psychological Indicators of PSWBI

Variable	Mean	SD	F-Value	Sig
Decision Making				
High decision making	3.2397	0.34838	F(2,397)=140.687	0.000
Medium decision making	2.9656	0.32120		
Low decision making	2.5825	0.31788		
Life Satisfaction				
High level of satisfaction	3.2268	0.38001	F (2,397) =99.363	0.000
Medium level of satisfaction	2.9619	0.30996		
Low level of satisfaction	2.5989	0.35759		
Mobility And Social Relations				
High level of mobility and social relations	3.1792	0.33775	F (2,397) =58.945	0.000
Medium level of mobility and social relations	2.8951	0.40938		
Low level of mobility and social relations	2.6130	0.34943		
Psychological Problems				
High level of Psychological Problems	2.6391	0.39040	F (2,397) =43.635	0.000
Medium level of Psychological Problems	2.9438	0.37587		
Low level of Psychological Problems	3.1398	0.40199		
Family Responsibility				
High responsibility	2.6356	0.35509	F(2,397)=31.678	0.000
Medium responsibility	2.9262	0.41539		
Low responsibility	3.0186	0.43796		

Source: Field survey, 2019.

Discussion:***Impact of Male Migration on Family Responsibility***

Rural wives consistently bear a huge responsibility towards their family whether husband, children or in-laws. But when a man migrates his wife has to take up some unaccustomed new responsibilities and changes in an environment which she was never prepared to accept (Parrado & Flippen, 2010). Wives living in big families are challenged to carry out greater responsibilities compared to the wives of small families because of higher number of dependents in the family and other responsibilities such as looking after livestock, children, in-laws and other relatives (Gordon, 2007). The study reflects the similar scenario in rural Cooch Behar District. Elder wives (≥ 35 yrs) in the study area are more attached with joint families who also experience a long-time separation from their husband (> 10 months). They did not receive their remittances regularly in every month. Thus, they have to depend on debts or financial support from other family members to accomplish their needs (Gartuala et.al, 2011). In this way they are bound to perform greater family responsibilities and lesser autonomy.

Sabitri, 40yrs, married wife, mother of three children, living with her in-laws said, when my husband is unable to send money for two or three months, my in-laws (father and mother) force me to go and stay with my parents because they can't provide expense of four of us. My mother-in-law lends me fare of toto and bus to move to my ancestral village. But in case of my elder sister-in-law as she lives independently in separate house with only her two children her husband send money regularly, they enjoy happy and prosperous life.

The left behind wives of joint families faces difficulties in maintaining good relation with their in-laws instead of bearing more family responsibility and suffer more psychological distress (Thomas & Adhikary, 2012)

Impact of Male Migration on Decision Making:

In a traditional patriarchal rural society, the social norms are women should play limited role in decision making and should have limited control over resources in the family (Hadi, 2001). However, the position of left behind wives in rural Cooch Behar tends to be changed because of absence of their male counter parts. Traditionalism relaxed and they enjoy becoming more autonomous and extrovert (Colfer, 1985). Young wives of small families have more liberty to get involved in family decision making, compared to elder wives of large or semi-large families. Presence of in-laws in family restrict their participation in decision making either by controlling them, interfering in their decision making or completed them to listen or obey their husbands (Choitani, 2019). Husbands of small families migrate for less duration (< 6 months) and send remittances regularly as they are aware about the fact that their family is entirely dependent on their earning and don't have any other alternative way. So, the wives

receive remittances regularly (every month) and being the de-facto head of the family, they took up the full control over budget, plan and management of the expenditure of remittance which in turn enhance their autonomy to be a decision maker (Gardner,1995).

Impact of Male Migration on mobility and social relations:

The stereotype rural patriarchal structure considers wives as primary care givers in the family with restricted mobility and social relations. Nevertheless, migration of their husband in the study area, accelerates their mobility while visiting children's school, doctors, local markets, purchasing grocery etc. (Datta & Mishra, 2011). Young wives living in small family set up are more inclined to be mobile to sustain their needs as they don't have other persons at their home to help them. Whereas, the elder wives of joint families face limitations in accessing the outer world because of imposed restrictions on them by their in-laws and other family members. Also, they face hesitation in commuting besides their own surrounding.

Although, these left behind wives start interacting with different organisations or persons to access assistance and for their livelihood (Yabiku, et. al. 2010). Wives of small family's turn to more socially connected with different peoples to fulfil their own purpose. Long out migration of husbands (>10 months) enables wives to improve their social relations. They need assistance from others, neighbours etc. to consummate their necessities.

Rehana, 25 years, small family, mother of two children, said, my husband only send money but I am responsible to manage its spending wisely and take all the decisions myself regarding family responsibility, regular shopping of vegetables, fish or grocery and children's school, tuition etc. In his absence, I have to go to market to feed my children, also have to go to doctors if they fall ill. It doesn't matter to me what other people says. My husband trusts me. I don't always use 'Pardah' like other females of my community. But still they are not at all allowed to go to market alone.

The statement of Rehana reflects another superstition against women in the rural society, is use of 'Pardah' (Rashid, 2013). This also restricts their mobility. Adversely, the wives of joint families have to confront with several criticisms if they set good social relations (Lei & Desai,2021).

Impact of Male migration on Life satisfaction:

Life satisfaction in migration induced families is due to its economic benefits which brings psychological well-being (Iveles, et.al, 2019). The rural left behind wives of Cooch Behar district is mostly dependent on regular remittances to run their households. If there is shortage of remittance then it drastically effects the families (Goldring, 2004). It is portrayed from the survey that young wives living in large family set up have more life satisfaction in terms of their improvement in lifestyle and shouldering less responsibility to manage financial crisis. The other family members who have alternate income always give them support to satisfy their basic needs. But in few cases the wives of small family enjoy more improvement in their lifestyle by building cemented house, enrolling their children in private schools and also by accessing modern household stuffs. On the contrary, the elder wives of small families are less satisfied because most of the times their husband don't send remittances regularly nor take family responsibilities properly. Thus, these wives have to engage in economic activities to supplement the remittance (Antman, 2015). Their agony hampers their life satisfaction.

The story of Sarathi, 37years, wife, and mother of three children tells us the same. My husband went to Kerala for construction work but he became addicted to gambling and alcohol with his friends. At early phase he used to send remittances regularly. We constructed this new house at that time. But slowly he became irregular in sending remittance. Now he sends after 2-4 months. We have to take debts from others. My in-laws are helpful. They take care of us. But I and my elder son have to work at agricultural field to feed the family and survive. His addiction has ruined us. I wish if he returns this time he may not go there in future.

Impact of Male Migration on Psychological Problems:

Psychological problems of left behind wives is negatively related to psychological wellbeing. The wives in the study area seems to suffer from psychological distress such as loneliness, isolation, stress and depression. The young wives in the study area, face more psychological problem than elder wives and it is more acute in small families (De Haas & Van Rooij, 2010) than large families. In large families the family members share the mental stress or loneliness of left behind wives. But in small families worries, hardship and responsibilities make them more stressed (Jacka,2012).

Parbati, 19 years, mother of one child, said, my husband migrated after six months of our marriage. I then felt very helpless, lonely and frightened as this was a new place for me. My mother-in-law made me comfortable with the situation. I made some new friends here.

The prolonged absence of husbands sometimes increases strains in relations with in-laws and lack in basic adjustment (Sigh, 2018). In rural Cooch Behar District long duration migration (>10 months) intensify more psychological problems. But in most of the cases wives cope up with their loneliness with help of mobile phones (Sikder & Ballis, 2013).

Jaya, 40 years, living in a large family structure expressed that I have to depend upon my nephews of nieces to call and talk with my husband as I don't have any mobile phone. But most of the time they are busy with their phone and I have to adjust with their time. Sometimes my sister-in-laws rudely ask me to pay the phone call amount.

Concluding Remarks:

The article made an attempt to analyse the impact of husband's out migration, due to employment in other states of India, upon psychological well-being of left behind wives. The finding is that, there is both positive and negative impact of migration on psychology left behind wives. As reflected in the study, in context of husbands' migration wives become more involved in decision making, mobility and socially connected which widens their scope of activities and also improves their position in traditional patriarchal society. The positive change in their life style plays a crucial role in development, life satisfaction and improvement in family prestige. On the other hand, the psychological problems of isolation, depression and over burden of family responsibility are also associated with husbands' migration. The study points out those young wives of 18-26 years age are enjoying more autonomy in their social life. Contrary to them elder wives above 35 years age are the vulnerable group in this respect. Regular receiving of remittances also made these young wives more empowered. Somewhat, psychological problems of managing financial crisis or distress are mostly resolved in large family structures. Involvement in paid works of the wives is not a choice rather it's a compulsion for them. Wives in this position can be benefitted if they receive any kind of training or counselling regarding their finance, overcoming strenuous relations with family members and overcoming depression. The families also need advice how to deal with such left behind wives and their psychological issues. Such services can be initiated by NGOs and Social workers. Further researches can be made to identify other causes of psychological problems and to develop specific strategies for these wives depending on their family structure, age and economic status. These types of strategies can help them to cope up with the problems in absence of their husband.

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