



Consequences of Paternal Migration on Left behind Children: A Case Study of Malappuram District

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Abstract

Paternal migration is a form of labour mobility in which fathers migrate for economic opportunities while their children remain in the home community. It often results in altered family roles, emotional restructuring and developmental implications for left behind children. This study investigates the negative effects of paternal migration on the socioeconomic and emotional well-being of left behind children in Koottilangadi Panchayat in Malappuram district. By using a deliberately fixed sample of 220 migrant households, the study employs a mixed method approach, integrating in depth interviews with mothers/guardians and focus group discussions with children. Primary data were collected through direct interviews by using a structured questionnaire. A purposive sampling method was employed to select school going children aged 7 to 17 from households with paternal migrants. By using Exploratory Factor Analysis the study identifies the major effects of paternal migration on the left behind children. The findings reveal that the absence of father often results in worry, loneliness, struggle with academic consistency and isolation due to the lack of direct paternal involvement and emotional support. The research concludes with policy recommendations for local governance bodies, schools and community based organisations. It suggests the need for structured emotional counselling, educational mentoring programs and periodic virtual engagement mechanisms between migrant fathers and their children. Such interventions are essential to bridge the emotional and developmental gap created by migration and ensure the holistic well-being of left behind children.

1. Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon that precedes human civilisation. In both developed and developing countries, migration is a common occurrence that continuously makes a substantial contribution to the development of new opportunities in a variety of capacities. The main determinants of migration are high population density, surplus labour, high unemployment rates in the domestic labour market, low incomes, housing dissatisfaction, the need for higher education, rural-urban wage disparities, the distance between village and city, land ownership patterns and previous migration patterns. According to Kerala Migration Survey Report of 2023, the number of emigrants from Kerala increased from 2.1 million in 2018 to 2.2 million in 2023. This report shows an increase of 32,388 migrants in 2023 as compared to 2018 and Malappuram district in Kerala has consistently recorded the highest number of emigrants in all the Kerala Migration surveys.

Paternal migration is a common occurrence in many areas and is frequently encouraged by financial constraints. Parents may view migration as a way to alleviate the hardships of unemployment and poverty in their families and to provide their kids a better future. Remittances from such migrations can increase the financial stability of a family. This kind of migration frequently involve a high social and emotional cost, particularly for children. Absence of father causes a void in a child's emotional support, direction and participation in day to day activities, which can affect the social development, academic achievement and psychological health of children. The family structures and home communities of migrants have been strongly

impacted by unprecedented internal and international migration movements in recent decades (Graham and Yeoh, 2013). The study is conceptually informed by the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), which views migration as a household survival strategy, and by child development theories emphasising the importance of parental presence in shaping emotional security, behavioural regulation and academic outcomes.

The economic benefits of migration such as increased household income and improve living standards are widely recognised. However, the social and emotional consequences on the left behind children remain a significant concern. In many rural communities the absence of fathers due to migration disrupts traditional family structures and parenting roles. It leaves children to face various challenges. These challenges are not only emotional such as feelings of loneliness and insecurity, but also practical such as increased responsibilities or diminished access to guidance and mentorship from a guardian. Remittance send by the fathers may provide financial stability, improve access to education and enhance overall household well beings. Conversely, prolonged absence of fathers may lead to emotional problems and behavioural issues.

2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of literature has examined the impact of male migration on families left behind. Most studies focusing on the economic, psychological, social, health and family related consequences experienced by household members of migrant workers. Existing research is an attempt to examine the effects of paternal on left.

Several studies have documented the positive economic contributions of migration, particularly through remittances. Kunwar (2022) observed that parental migration may positively influence the education and health of children by increasing household income and enabling greater investment in schooling and medical care. Khan et al. (2024) found that remittances have short term benefits such as increased consumption and poverty reduction, while their long term effects include improved educational attainment and better health outcomes. Davis and Brazil (2016) also viewed international migration as a livelihood strategy adopted by parents to enhance the educational and career prospects of children. Dinh (2019) further emphasised that income from migrant work is essential for financing the education, nutrition and healthcare of children.

Despite these economic benefits, numerous studies have highlighted the adverse social, emotional and health related consequences of paternal absence. Kunwar (2022) reported that loneliness and psychological distress are common among children left behind in migrant households. Rai et al. (2023) examined the effects of parental migration on children's care and educational performance and found that the lack of parental guidance, supervision and emotional support can negatively affect the behaviour of children. In some cases it may lead to alcohol use and other risky activities. Study found that inadequate parental supervision and emotional neglect often push left behind children towards antisocial behaviour.

Health and nutritional outcomes of left behind children have also received significant scholarly attention. Davis and Brazil (2016) identified that prolonged parental absence can have harmful effects on children's physical health. It includes malnutrition and reduced healthcare expenditure. Lei et al. (2020) found that children of migrant fathers exhibited lower heights and body mass index (BMI) compared to children from non-migrant households. High socioeconomic development communities experienced lower heights and BMIs in the absence of fathers, though this pattern was not evident in low development settings.

Academic performance has emerged as another crucial area affected by paternal migration. Aradhy et al. (2019) demonstrated that children of fathers who migrate repeatedly have significantly lower grade point averages compared to children of permanent migrants, even after controlling for individual and family characteristics. Atinder (2016) highlighted that the absence of father negatively influences the educational engagement of children. It leads to poor academic interest due to easy access to an inflow of remittances. Dinh (2019) asserts that while migration income supports education, the absence of parental care can undermine educational and health outcomes.

Family separation resulting from migration has also been linked to psychological distress and reduced mental well-being among children. Kunwar (2022) emphasised that migration often leads to fragmented family structures, with children experiencing prolonged separation from one or both parents.

Although the existing literature extensively discusses the economic, health, educational and psychological dimensions of parental migration. There is a notable research gap regarding the direct and holistic assessment of the positive and negative impacts of father's migration on left behind children. Most studies examine parental migration in general and focus was mainly given to economic outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to specifically assess the impact of paternal migration on the well-being, psychological and emotional dimensions of left behind children.

3. Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data for the study was collected from Kerala migration surveys. Primary data were collected through direct interviews using a structured questionnaire. A purposive sampling method was employed to select school going children aged 7 to 17 from households with paternal migrants. Malappuram district in Kerala has consistently recorded the highest number of emigrants in all the Kerala Migration Surveys conducted so far. Therefore, the study focuses on the Koottilangadi Panchayat in Malappuram district, a prominent hub of Gulf migration. With the help of local Anganwadi workers, Kudumbasree members and ward level records, a list of migrant households were prepared. From this list, households were purposively selected to ensure variation in socioeconomic background. Using a deliberately fixed sample of 220 migrant households, the study employs a mixed method approach, integrating in depth interviews with mothers/guardians and focus group discussions with children. The sample size of 220 households was determined based on feasibility considerations and the availability of eligible migrant households within the selected Panchayat. To assess the negative effects of the migration of father on the left behind children, Factor analysis with Principal Component Analysis was used which identified the major psychological and emotional issues of left-behind children due to paternal migration. Loneliness

4. Result and Discussion

To assess the negative impact of father's migration on the left behind children, an Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed using a Principal Component Analysis and Varimax rotation. The minimum factor loading criteria was set to 0.50. Component Matrix of Principal Component Analysis which reduces complex data into fewer dimensions or components by identifying underlying latent constructs.

Table 1. Component Matrix

Serial No.	Factors	Components			
		1	2	3	4
1	Worry	0.85	0.045	0.048	-0.19
2	Loneliness	0.78	0.159	0.028	0.24
3	Struggle with Academic Consistency	0.75	0.071	-0.24	0.28
4	Isolation	0.71	-0.14	0.318	-0.31
5	Health Issues	0.51	-0.12	0.343	-0.03
6	Fear	0.4	-0.23	0.05	0.04
7	Anxiety	0.07	0.848	0.044	0.15
8	Stress	0.04	0.797	-0.13	-0.32
9	Anger	-0.1	0.607	0.466	-0.02
10	Lack of Emotional Support	0.13	-0.07	0.72	0.34
11	Lack of Confidence	0.3	0.111	-0.63	0.52
12	Unsociable	0.4	-0.03	-0.41	-0.55

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: Primary Survey

Table 1 presents the component loadings from the factor analysis showing how each factor loads or correlates into 4 extracted components. Higher loadings (closer to +1 or -1) mean stronger association with that component. Component 1 represents worry, isolation and loneliness co-exist with struggle with academic consistency. The Component 2 represents health issues, fear and anxiety and the Component 3 reflects stress with anger. The Component 4 represents lack of emotional support and confidence and lack of social interaction.

The results of the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity is given in Table 2

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	0.586	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	768.811
	df	66
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy is 0.586 and it indicates that the sampling adequacy is just acceptable for factor analysis. The KMO value of 0.586 and the significant Bartlett's Test ($p < 0.01$) support the factorability of the dataset. Therefore, Principal Component Analysis is appropriate. Hence Table 2 indicate that the data set is suitable for Principal Component Analysis.

The total variance explained by each of the four components extracted from Principal Component Analysis is given in Table 3

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Components	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Eigenvalue	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage	Eigenvalue	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage
1	3.113	25.943	25.943	2.83	23.579	23.579
2	1.863	15.526	41.469	1.85	15.421	39
3	1.597	13.309	54.777	1.596	13.302	52.302
4	1.081	9.007	63.785	1.378	11.483	63.785
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.						

Source: Primary Survey

Table 3 summarises how much of the total variance in the dataset is explained by each principal component. It helps in dimension reduction by identifying the most meaningful components that capture the majority of the variability in the data. Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings indicate the initial eigenvalues and the amount of variance explained by each component before rotation. A component with an eigenvalue greater than 1 is typically considered significant. The eigenvalue shows the sum of squared loadings indicating the amount of variance that component explains and eigenvalue having more than 1 are taken as major components. The result indicate that the four components together explain about 63.8 percent of the total variance in the dataset. Component 1 explains 25.9 proportion of total variance in all variables and components 2 and 3 explains 15.5 percent and 13.3 percent of total variance respectively. The Component 4 explains 9.0 percentage of total variance in all variables. Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings indicate rotation redistributes the variance to achieve a simpler and more interpretable structure after Varimax Rotation. Total cumulative variance remains the same (63.785 percentage), but variance is more evenly distributed. Hence rotation improves clarity, making it easier to interpret the underlying dimensions or factors.

The correlation matrix coefficients between 12 factors related to emotional and mental issues of left-behind children due to paternal migration is given in Table 4. The closer a value is to 1 or -1, the stronger the relationship.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

	Facto r 1	Facto r 2	Facto r 3	Facto r 4	Facto r 5	Facto r 6	Facto r 7	Facto r 8	Facto r 9	Facto r 10	Facto r 11	Facto r 12
Facto r 1	1											
Facto r 2	0.195	1										
Facto r 3	0.072	0.541	1									
Facto r 4	-0.08	0.54	0.528	1								
Facto r 5	0.241	0.458	0.64	0.378	1							
Facto r 6	-0.21	0.225	0.286	0.192	0.249	1						
Facto r 7	0.028	0.219	0.303	0.19	0.247	0.055	1					
Facto r 8	-0.01	0.176	0.104	0.154	-0.13	-0.12	-0.01	1				
Facto r 9	0.189	0.021	-0.13	-0.1	0.003	-0.09	-0.14	0.375	1			
Facto r 10	0.171	0.301	0.401	0.334	0.262	0.082	0.112	-0.09	0.054	1		
Facto r 11	-0.16	0.063	0.14	-0.03	-0.02	0.113	-0.14	0.528	0.271	-0.081	1	
Facto r 12	-0.12	0.317	0.128	0.401	-0.1	0.194	0.016	0.036	-0.14	-0.074	0.059	1

Table 4 indicate that worry is highly correlated with loneliness, isolation, academic impact and sadness. Lack of emotional support is not strongly related to most emotional states, but has a weak positive link to isolation (0.241). Stress and Anxiety go hand in hand (0.528). The left behind children whose academics are affected tend to also experience lack of confidence (0.401) and health issues (0.334). Stress and anxiety are closely linked and it reinforces their role in academic and emotional distress. Anger and fear show low connectivity to other emotional states. Hence it is concluded that left-behind children reporting higher worry, loneliness and isolation are more likely to face academic and emotional challenges.

5. Focus Group Discussion

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted at an Anganwadi centre in the second ward of Koottilangadi Panchayat. The participants included five mothers of left-behind children, two adolescent children aged between 13 and 16 years from migrant households and two Anganwadi workers. The primary objective of the Focus Group Discussion was to understand the social, emotional, academic and physical effects of paternal migration on left-behind children.

During the discussion, several mothers shared their lived experiences of raising children in the prolonged absence of their spouses. Ayesha, the mother of a nine year old girl, reported that her husband has been working in Dubai for the past twelve years and visits the family only once a year, usually for less than a month. She expressed concern that her daughter, Fiza, frequently misses her father, particularly during school events, annual day celebrations, parent teacher meetings and family functions where other children are accompanied by both parents. Ayesha noted that Fiza often becomes withdrawn on such occasions and asks why her father cannot attend like other children's fathers.

Girija, mother of 12 year girl Ardra, highlighted that her daughter is always showing signs of emotional stress like anxiety, lack of concentration and occasional decline in academic performance. They noted that her daughter always over dependent on her showing attention seeking behaviour both at home and in school.

Bindu, 36 years, mother of Benhan shared that her son shows behavioural changes such as anger outbursts and lack of discipline, especially during adolescence. She felt that the absence of a paternal authority figure makes it difficult to manage the behaviour of child as children often do not respond to mothers in the same way they would to fathers in matters of discipline and guidance.

The adolescent participants also shared their perspectives. Nyla Hussain, a 16-year old higher secondary school student expressed feelings of loneliness and emotional distance from her father. She mentioned that although they occasionally speak over phone or video calls, time differences, limited conversation time and lack of emotional connection make communication difficult. She added that she finds it hard to share personal problems, academic stress and emotional struggles with her father. It leads to feelings of isolation. Vinu, 18 years old student participant reported that during important decision making moments such as choosing academic streams or career paths, the absence of the father creates confusion and emotional insecurity.

The narratives from the Focus Group Discussion reinforce the quantitative findings, mainly the dimensions of loneliness, academic stress, lack of emotional support and behavioural instability identified through factor analysis. The qualitative insights provide contextual depth to the statistical patterns observed in the survey data. The Focus Group Discussion revealed that while paternal migration significantly contributes to improved financial stability and better material living conditions, it also creates serious challenges for the emotional, academic and social development of left behind children. The prolonged absence of a father affects the sense of security, discipline, emotional bonding and mental well-being of children. Participants strongly emphasised the need for institutional support systems such as counselling services for children and mothers, academic mentoring, parenting support programmes and community based initiatives to facilitate better communication between migrant fathers and their families.

6. Conclusion and Policy Suggestions

The study reveals that paternal migration has far reaching and multifaceted consequences on the well-being of left-behind children. The study contributes empirically to migration literature by isolating paternal migration effects rather than general parental migration within a Kerala specific Gulf migration context. While remittances from migrant fathers often improve household economic conditions, they do not automatically translate into better developmental outcomes for children. The findings of Exploratory Factor Analysis indicate that left behind children reporting higher worry, loneliness and isolation are more likely to face academic and emotional challenges. Children in migrant households tend to experience better access to material resources and parental involvement in education. Some children exhibit signs of psychological stress, behavioural changes and social isolation due to the absence of paternal guidance. The study underlines that economic benefits alone cannot compensate for the psychosocial and developmental gaps arising from prolonged paternal absence. A child centred approach is essential to address these complex challenges.

This study recommends Community Based Support Systems to provide emotional, academic and psychological support and to strengthen school based interventions to monitor and guide children of migrant parents. The study also recommends parenting support for mothers by conducting workshops focusing on parenting strategies, stress management and accessing local welfare services. This research further recommends a digital communication facilitation to promote and subsidise digital tools that enable regular and meaningful communication between migrant fathers and their children, helping maintain emotional bonds. Remittance utilisation awareness programs for migrant families can be conducted to ensure that remittances are effectively used for the child's education, health and overall development. Also, a local monitoring system under the Panchayath can be set up to collect periodic data on left behind children's academic performance, health and well-being. The study recommends Inclusive Panchayath Planning to integrate migrant families into Panchayath level development plans, with dedicated schemes or budget allocations for left behind children's education, nutrition, and recreational needs and Migrant Welfare Coordination Cells at Panchayath level to mediate with migrant parents abroad, update them on their child's development, and facilitate emergency family communication when needed.

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