

Male Migration in Kerala: A study of the Impact on the wives of Migrants

Bigi Thomas

I/C Director, Department of Social Work, S. P. University, V.V. Nagar, Gujarat

E-mail: bigisuresh12@rediffmail.com

Abstract

One of the key issues in any migration study relates to what happens to the family members of migrant after his migration. Invariably most of the migrants are males who move alone without taking with them their wives or other members of the family. Several reasons ranging from not having a family visa to education of children prevent the male migrants from taking their family members with them. An attempt has been made to study the positive and negative impact of male migration on women. With regard to gender equity, existing research reports that migration can produce positive and empowering experiences for women. When they enjoy all the fruits of migration, the findings of this study lead to a conclusion that the left behind wives of the migrants face several problems too. This article examines the different hardships and the great transformation happened in the lives of these women due to the migration of their men.

Key Words: General Adjustment Level, Migration, Psychological problems, Psychosomatic problems, Social support.

Introduction

Human migration is one of the most challenging issues facing the world today. Indian emigration has been taking place since centuries but never before in history India witnessed such massive movements of people from India to other parts of the world as in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹

The basic motivation for migration is predominantly economic all over the world.. People move from one place to another in search of better opportunities for employment and income and for economic security. In short, migration is undertaken by people with the hope of raising resources necessary for improving the standard of living for themselves and their kinsfolk on a sustainable basis. There exist, of course, several other motivating factors too- climatic conditions, religions considerations, kinship ties, educational aspirations and so on, In Kerala, these factors appear to be of little relevance.²

Though Kerala has emerged as an important migrating state during recent years, very few

keralites seemed to have moved out Kerala till the end of 19th century. Instead, Kerala had been a haven of immigrants like the Konkans, Pattar Brahmins, and the Rowther Muslims etc from the neighboring states. Even trading communities like the Gujarati, Sindhis, and Chettis had their ethnic enclaves in the commercial centers of Kerala. Furthermore, when the Europeans opened plantation of coffee and tea in the Travancore region of Kerala during the latter half of the 19th century, the bulk of the labour supply came from the Madras presidency. Not surprisingly, the census reports of the closing decades of the 19th century speak of Keralites as a home- bound people apparently because of the absence of any settlement of the Keralites in other parts of India, though Kerala was well connected even with forging lands from ancient past.³

Kerala migration, to the rest of India and to countries abroad, is almost entirely determined by economic considerations. The basic motivation for migration from Kerala is economic. People move out of the state in search of employment, higher incomes and greater economic security to improve their and their families' immediate and long term standard of living.²

Education is a major migration facilitating

Reprints Requests: Dr. (Mrs.) Bigi Thomas
I/C Director, Department of Social Work
S. P. University, V.V. Nagar, Gujarat
Email: bigisuresh12@rediffmail.com

factor. From areas where the member of young, educated persons is in excess supply, they tend to move to areas where there is demand for their services. Traditionally, out-migration from the state followed this pattern propensities to migrate were higher among educated persons. However this was not the case with the Gulf region where the greatest demand, until recently, has been for construction workers. Being a highly literate state which has a large, unemployed population is a salivating factor behind Kerala's large scale migration.²

Migration has consequences for both men and women. In the case of men, the consequences come about mostly because of their own migration. In the case of women, however, consequences can come about, not only because of their own migration, but also because of the migration of their husbands.⁴

The absence of husband causes several hardships for wives but at the same it brings several benefits also. Separation leads to several problems especially when separation between husband and wife is for a long period. In a society where usually men do all the outside work and women are supposed to manage only the internal house-hold work, the responsibilities in terms of do things independently is something which is not familiar to the women. However difficult the task may be, getting it done by both husband and wife and enjoying the success or accepting the failure together and being a source of support and console to each other is the beauty of married life, something which is missing from these separated couples. Migration of the spouses to faraway places for some years puts the women in a perplexed and alien condition where they need lots of support and help from the families and society. In many cases the women find it difficult to get adjusted to such a condition where they will have to struggle a lot not only physically but also psychologically.⁵

At the same time migration of their husbands bring a great transformation in the lives of these women not only from the economical point of view but also from the social, familial, psychological and spiritual aspects of lives. Many of them become self-reliant, confident and more active and are able to manage the families single-handedly. It could give the Gulf wives an

opportunity to develop their talents, expertise, status and independence to their full potential. In that respect the initial handicaps could be turned into a blessing for the family and the society in general.⁹

The objectives of the study are

1. To understand the demographical characteristics of the migrants families.
2. To study the nature of psychological and psychosomatic problems of the wives of male migrants.

To measure the level of general adjustment of the wives of the male migrants.

To study the association between the psychological & psychosomatic problems and various independent variables like age, period of stay together, number of children, social support etc.

The hypotheses of the study are

1. Younger the age, higher the psychological and psychosomatic problems among wives.
2. Higher the help received from children, lower the psychological and Psychosomatic problems faced by mothers.
3. Higher the age, lesser the difficulties with children faced by mothers.
4. Higher the level of education, better the level of general adjustment among wives.
5. Lower the level of psychological and psychosomatic problems better the level of general adjustment among wives of male migrants.

Methodology

This study is based on the primary data collected in 2004-2005 from nine migration prone taluks, three taluks each from Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and Alappuzha districts of Kerala. A quota of 40 samples from each district was decided and care was taken to include minimum 10 samples from the above mentioned taluks of each district. Then a purposive sampling method was used to select the samples with the following criteria. The criteria adopted for selection of the samples was duration of migration (at least one year), marital status and duration of marriage (at least one year) and age of the woman (18-60). If there were more than

one woman in the household who fitted the selection criteria only one was selected for the study.

In all 120 left behind wives of migrants were interviewed.

Tools of Data Collection

Two detailed interview schedules for wives and children to collect data regarding their general background information were used. For wives a 39- item interview schedule and for the children a 41-item interview schedule were structured.

A 11-item Gurin Psychosomatic Symptom List developed by Gurin, Veroff and Feld (1960) was used to measure psychosomatic problems of the women whose husbands are working abroad.

A 5 item Social Support Scale developed by H.L.Kalia (1996) was used to measure the social support received by the wives of the male migrants.

A 16 item Psychological Symptom List was developed to measure the psychological problems of the wives of the male migrants.

A 33 item-General Adjustment Inventory Scale developed by Pramod Kumar (1983) was used to understand the left behind wives' ability to do adjustment with others, situations and oneself.

Major Findings and Conclusions

When they enjoy all the fruits of migration, the findings of this study lead to a conclusion that the left behind wives and children of the migrants face several problems too. Majority of the left behind wives are in their adulthood, a stage in the lifespan of a human being which has several developmental tasks like settling down in their lives, managing the family, parenting children, looking after elders etc. Having a helping hand from the spouse can always be a support to a woman to cope up with such stressful situations. Absence of such a help may add to their burden which leads them to develop different psychological and psychosomatic problems.

What cannot be disputed is the emotional and psychological strain that most of the women underwent in the absence of their husbands. The long separation added to the inadequate

communication between the partners complicated the situation. (T.V.Sekhar, 1996), is an assertion which could be substantiated by this study with the finding that majority of the respondents suffer from many psychological problems like isolation, depression, feeling unwanted, inability to adjust with others, restlessness, lack of confidence, feeling of becoming dependent, feeling of loss of family life etc in the absence of their husbands at home.⁶

Becoming tired in a short period, trouble in staying asleep, trouble in getting to sleep, aches in lower back, upper back, neck, constriction in the chest, poor appetite, high blood pressure etc are some of the psychosomatic problems suffered by the left behind wives under this study. This supports the finding of a study that a good percentage of these women who have to manage families on their own due to employment of their husbands outside the country suffer from deterioration of psychosomatic health (Kalia, 1996).⁷

Majority do not have any leisure time activity as they do not get extra time when burdened with dual roles in their families. Many of them control their sexual urge while few of them masturbate and very few keep extramarital relations. In most of the families even though the husbands are away from home, important decisions are taken by husbands alone. Home management, child caring, financial and decision making are some of the areas identified by respondents where they feel empowered by themselves.

A good number of the respondents have cordial relations with their own parents and siblings while they have only fair relations with their in-laws and others in the absence of their spouses. Majority of the respondents keep a fair social relationship with others which is neither cordial nor conflict, may help them at times of need.

Chi-square tests revealed significant associations between psychological problems - faced by the respondents and their age, duration of marriage, living status, number of years spouses intend to continue abroad, help received by children, harassment by in-laws, help received by in-laws.

No significant association is seen between the psychological problems of left behind wives and their occupation, period of stay together with their spouses, frequency of husbands visit to home and their number of children.

Analysis of bi-variate tables revealed significant associations between psychosomatic problems of the respondents and their age, period of stay together with their spouses duration of marriage, living status, help received by children, harassment by in-laws and help received by in - laws. And the chi - square tests do not show any significant association between psychosomatic problems of the respondents and their occupation, frequency of husbands visit to home, number of years husbands intend to continue abroad and number of children.

Analysis of data show significant associations between the general adjustment level of the respondents and their age, educational qualifications, occupation, help received from in - laws, harassment by in - laws, harassment by in - laws help received from children etc.

There is significant association between the feeling of women being empowered and their living status and social relations while no significant association is seen between the educational level & feeling of being empowered. Chi - square tests reveal significant association between social relations and their age and difficulties with children when no significant association is seen between social relations and the occupational status of wives.

Data analysis also show the presence of significant association between difficulties with children and the age of the respondents while no significant association is seen between difficulties with children and the occupational status of the wives.

Further this study reveals that psychological and psychosomatic problems are more among wives who stay with their in-laws. This emphasizes the observations made by earlier studies that women whose in-laws are not staying along with do not tend to experience breathing trouble, tension, or have trouble getting to sleep or high blood pressure (H.L.Kalia, 1996) and majority of the migrants' wives are in desperate conditions, especially those young girls

who are staying with their in-laws. Feelings of loneliness, pain of separation from the husbands, anxiety about the husband and children, and children's indiscipline are their major problems (Reeba, 2004).⁸

In a study it is noted that two factors can be identified as having had a stabilizing effect on the women under these circumstances- firstly the support rendered by the family members and other relatives helped a great deal in easing mental stress and loneliness, and secondly, the traditional family set-up and the conservative values prevailing in the society also helped to overcome the trauma of separation and prevented family dissolution (Sekhar, 1996).⁶ This is supported by the findings of this study that higher the help by children and in-laws lower the psychological and psychosomatic problems faced by left behind women.

Majority of the respondents under this study have moderate level difficulties with children. They always find it difficult to attend the school functions of their children alone. Disciplining the children is another difficult area identified by the respondents. Managing character building, dealing with the ever increasing financial demands and taking care of the medical problems of the children single handedly are some other difficulties pointed out by the respondents in the absence of their spouses. This emphasizes the observation made by an earlier study that more than half of the mothers are facing problems like, stubbornness, disobedience, extravaganza, late coming and other behavioural problems from their children (Reeba, 2004),⁸ a factor which is also acknowledged by Sekhar (1996) in his study of Male Emigration and Changes in the Family.

It is evident from this study that economic remittances from their working abroad fathers are enabling the children to have better education as majority of the children of these migrant families are studying in English medium and private schools. This supports the findings of some earlier studies that almost all migrant families have built good houses or renewed and extended old ones, bought properties and gold, given good education for their children and have modern life facilities (Reeba, 2004) and majority of the women were very keen to ensure that the

Table 1. Spearman's Rank Correlation Table showing various Personal Characteristics of left behind wives and their level of Psychological problems, Psycho- somatic problems, General adjustment, Difficulties with children and Social Relations.

		Psychological	Psychosomatic	G.Adj	D.W.C	Social Relation
Age	value	-0.85	0.110	0.02	-0.223	0.079
	sig	0.241	0.128	0.784	0.008	0.288
Education	value	-0.154	-0.126	0.305	0.037	-0.006
	sig	0.034	0.083	0.000	0.659	0.938
Occupation	value	-0.024	0.031	-0.143	0.075	-0.084
	sig	0.760	0.694	0.066	0.399	0.290
Period of Stay together	value	0.027	0.022	-0.067	-0.132	0.061
	sig	0.697	0.753	0.330	0.095	0.387
Years of Marriage	value	0.016	0.144	-0.126	-0.280	0.045
	sig	0.817	0.041	0.075	0.001	0.533
Freq. of Husband Visit to home.	value	0.133	0.046	-0.022	0.161	-0.070
	sig	0.062	0.517	0.760	0.050	0.337
Living Status of Wife	value	0.214	0.059	-0.141	-0.029	0.097
	sig	0.004	0.426	0.056	0.733	0.199
Years Intended to Work	value	0.000	0.037	-0.255	-0.159	-0.346
	sig	1.000	0.691	0.005	0.135	0.000
No. of Children.	value	-0.014	-0.162	-0.031	-0.093	0.116
	sig	0.846	0.025	0.670	0.262	0.118
Help by Children	value	-0.274	-0.253	0.127	0.063	-0.068
	sig	0.001	0.003	0.136	0.519	0.434
Harassed by in-Laws	value	-0.022	-0.245	0.170	0.220	0.134
	sig	0.771	0.001	0.025	0.011	0.086
Feeling of being Empowered	value	0.277	-0.019	-0.152	0.194	-0.008
	sig	0.001	0.813	0.059	0.037	0.924

children were admitted in good schools, preferably convent schools or other English medium institutions (Sekhar, 1996).⁶

The above table shows the correlations between various independent and dependent variables used in this study.

Among left behind wives the psychological problems of wives in terms of education and help by children are negatively correlated whereas in terms of feeling of being empowered it is positively correlated. Women with more education and women who receive more help from children tend to have less psychological problems while women who have the feeling of being empowered suffer with more psychological problems. This may be due to the strain they have to put in to cope with the expectations of others from their empowered status.

The psychosomatic problems of the wives of male migrants in terms of number of children and help by children is negatively correlated where as in terms of years of being married, it is positively correlated. So it is clear that mothers with more number of children and who get more help from the children tend to show less psychosomatic problems.

While there is significant negative correlation between help by children and psychological problems, there is significant negative correlation between help by children and psychosomatic problems too. These findings make it clear that higher the help received by children, lower the psychological and psychosomatic problems faced by the mothers.

The level of General adjustment is seen high among more educated women as compared to less educated. Women whose husbands are

planning to continue with their jobs abroad for a long time tend to show less adjustment level and social relations as compared to those whose husbands are planning to come back soon.

Further it is observed that difficulties with children are experienced more by young mothers. It is evident from the findings of this study that psychological problems faced by the left behind wives is positively correlated with their psychosomatic problems where as those wives who have less psychological and psychosomatic problems have high general adjustment level.

It is seen that there is negative correlation between age and difficulties with children which means higher the age of the mothers lesser is their difficulties with children. Further it is clear that education and general adjustment level of women are positively correlated, which means higher the educational level, higher is the level of general adjustment among wives of the migrants.

There is negative correlation between psychological problems and general adjustment (i.e. $r = - 0.47$ significant at 0.00 level) and psychosomatic problems and general adjustment (i.e. $r = - 0.34$ significant at 0.00 level). So the hypotheses lower the level of psychological and psychosomatic problems, higher the level of general adjustment is validated. Also this table juxtaposes the significant correlation (at 0.00 level) between psychological and psychosomatic problems of the wives. There is a positive correlation (significant at 0.04 level) between difficulties with children and the social relations of the mothers. Having healthy social relations with others must ease their difficulties in handling their children.

Table 2. Table showing Spearman's Rank correlations between various dependent variables like Psychological problems, Psycho-somatic problems, General adjustment, Difficulties with children and Social Relations of the wives of male migrants.

		P.P	P.S. P	G.A	D.W.C	S.R
Psychological P		1.00	0.534	-0.470	0.124	0.065
	Sig.	-	0.000	0.000	0.102	0.338
Psychosomatic P			1.00	-0.347	0.116	0.045
	Sig.		-	0.000	0.126	0.507
General Adjust				1.00	0.009	0.050
	Sig.			-	0.906	0.461
D.W.C.					1.00	0.046
	Sig.				-	0.553
Social Relation						1.00
	Sig.					-

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