



IMPACT OF MALE MIGRATION OVER LIVES OF WOMEN IN NAXAL AFFECTED AREA OF MAGADH

Nisha singh

Research scholar, Magadh University, Bihar, India

Abstract

Bihar has a rich history of out-migration from the state, which goes back to as early as the nineteenth century. However, during the last few decades, migration for work has increased manifold. The sheer scale of out-migration in contemporary Bihar is astounding. At any given point of time, as many as nearly one-half of the total number of working men are absent from the state, as they are working elsewhere in urban and rural centers in the country and abroad. Migration from the state is almost exclusively that of the male population and is embedded in the lives and life choices of the people. It is not just a livelihood strategy but a way of life in rural Bihar. While there is considerable research on various aspects of migration including the nature and pattern of migration from Bihar, the profile of migrant workers, migration destinations and other such correlates of a migrant's life outside the village, there is sparse literature on the impact of this migration on people, especially on the women who are left behind in the village. Many research questions remain unanswered. How are institutions such as patriarchy in the village affected by male migration? How does male migration influence women's well-being and agency? Does migration have an effect on women's mobility? Does it empower or disempower the women who are left behind? What role does technology such as mobile phones play in enabling those left behind to communicate with their migrant family members? What impact does this have on the women left behind in the villages? In addition, many of the males migrate to become naxals and leave their wives and other female members of the families to look after their houses. The lives of those women whose spouses have migrated to become naxals are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

The gender dimension within the migration studies began to be explored since the 1970s. But the focal points were about the women who migrated, reasons of their migration from the source location and their experiences of integration with the destination locations. The scope of the gender dimension started to broaden during the 1990s-2000s as the migration studies delved deeper and incorporated women who were not migrants themselves but were fundamentally affected due to migration of their male counterparts. In fact, initial studies by Indian scholars about this dimension started appearing in the late 1980s. However, this exploration of the gender dimension within the migration studies regarding the non-migrant women was still inchoate and limited to socio-economic impact that had been left on these women due to their male counterparts' out-migration. For instance, whether the remittances were instrumental in these women's development or dependence; and in what ways their male counterparts' outmigration impacted their mobility, autonomy, and decision-making in the household. Many males from Magadh region of Bihar have migrated to become naxals and this has impacted the lives of their spouses in negative way. The women have to deal with all the household requirements, agriculture and money issues. Being uneducated makes it more difficult for them to earn for the needs of their families. (Personal & Archive, 2013)



Reason for migration

For many people in the rural areas, the only alternative is to seek a living outside the village. The 'push' factors from the village are even more forceful than the promise of a good life in the cities. Until recently all internal migration was considered beneficent, but this is not so now. In the study "Migration from Rural Areas" inequality is considered the most important single variable underlying both 'push' and 'pull' factors, the former applying to the poor and the latter to the affluent in the rural society. But the book confines itself to the migrant and his characteristics. The rural family whom the migrant leaves behind has not been studied. There are, however, some useful points mentioned in the study: the majority of the migrants are male, married, have more education, and come from self- employed or non-agricultural households, perhaps agricultural laborers (who constitute only 5.4 per cent of the male migrants to urban areas in this study) migrate to other rural areas, where there is a high demand for labor. The villages from which they come have land shortage, low fertility, skewed distribution of land and a high proportion of landless labor. (Datta & Mishra, 2011)

When males migrate in Magadh region for joining the naxals, they sometimes do it for money, sometimes because of aggression caused due to their personal issues and sometimes they are threatened to join the naxals. In all the cases, the women who are left behind have to deal with the consequences and also have to step forward to gain the control of the family. This also affects their mental health in both positive and negative manner. Negative affect is when they have to think of earning process and have to live alone for their whole life. But they get a mental development and becomes a leader for their family.

There are two key reasons for this male-only pattern of migration.

First, socio-cultural norms restrict the mobility of women to distant urban areas. As dutiful wives, mothers, daughter-in-laws, they are expected to stay in the village and manage their rural households.

Enduring prolonged physical and emotional separation from their men, women also suffer from several gender-based vulnerabilities in villages.

This is despite the fact that women prioritized food and used household cash and other resources on food security more judiciously than men. This disadvantage arose largely because of the entrenched gender inequalities women-headed households faced.

One important reason for this is that women often face greater difficulties in accessing government-run social protection services such as PDS food rations, important source of food security in rural India. (Manuscript, 2010)

This occurs through two ways:

First, absence of men and social norms often restricting the participation of women in the affairs outside the household result in women who stay behind finding it hard to register their claims over their social protection entitlements; those who try are often unheard and manipulated.

Second, the local authorities in-charge of administering the safety nets often regard households with migrant members as having steady income streams, and thus, consider them ineligible for social protection benefits. (Bayeh, 2016)

It is under such circumstances of added gender-based vulnerabilities that remittances come to their rescue. However, with migration-based livelihoods in disarray for uncertain time, women-headed households will be particularly pressed to fend for themselves.



Rate of migration

The rate of migration from the state to both rural and urban destinations is very high, and is believed to have increased over the decade, with rural people becoming more mobile. Remittances from migration have significantly contributed to increased incomes in the state. Apart from contributing to growth processes in other parts of the country, the migrants from Bihar have also been key drivers of social change in rural Bihar. However, in recent times, they have been facing a backlash rooted in ethnocentric movements in the host locations, such as Maharashtra and Assam.

IMPACT OF MALE MIGRATION ON WOMEN

It would be reasonable to expect that the absence of husbands has a deep impact on women's lives. In an Indian context, two areas seem to be particularly affected. First, various studies of women's empowerment in India have noted limited autonomy and decision-making ability on the part of women. We expect that in their husbands' absence women may have a greater role in family decision-making and may be able to put aside norms of female seclusion since the husbands' absence would increase the need for their participation and leadership in the 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. Second, while male migration may be associated with a higher likelihood of remittances, women may need to fill in for absent husbands in many ways including care of animals, and work on the family farm or in the family business. Moreover, in some instances the sporadic nature of remittances may also force women to generate cash income through wage work.

Just as women's migration, especially for employment, can prove to be 'empowering', male outmigration may also provide opportunities for greater responsibility within the household for the wives of migrants left behind. At the same time, such a responsibility may prove to be a double-edged sword. While the absence of a husband may provide greater freedom, there may simultaneously be economic disadvantages, especially if remittances are irregular or non-existent. (Gangadharan et al., 2014)

On Women's Work:

The main motivation for migration is the search of employment and better income, and improves the quality of life for the household. Often, male migration leads to a rise in household income, and improved standards of living. In a study of a Catholic upper caste village of peasant origin in Goa, Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) found that male migration led to the withdrawal of women from agricultural work. In the case of Nepal, while using data from the 2004 Nepal household survey, Loshkin and Glinskaya (2008) found that male migration for work has a negative impact on the level of participation in market work by the women left behind. The impact is the strongest for women in the age group of 25-35 years and for women who have completed 11 or more years of education. Gulati (1993) studied 37 low-income households in Alakad, in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, from where men had migrated to West Asia. She found that this migration led to radical changes, and that male-dominated families transformed into female-dominated ones after this migration. This stream of international migration was able to multiply family incomes by 5-10 times, and women controlled the spending and investment of these remittances.

On Women's Decision-making Power in the Household:

The structure and composition of a household is a crucial variable for understanding the impact of male migration on women. Using data from a large-scale survey in 33 states in India, Desai and Banerji (2008)



argue that women living in nuclear families experience migration differently from their counterparts who live in joint families. The former, unlike the latter, experience both higher levels of autonomy and greater responsibility. With specific regard to nuclear households, Paris, et al. (1995) find that due to the absence of males, women have to perform tasks traditionally done by men, particularly, land preparation and other tasks during the peak cropping season. Their participation in decision-making related to the farm has also increased. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) has found that the absence of men for prolonged periods of time has made their wives the de facto heads of their households. The women have, in fact, become self-reliant, and manage both the households as well as remittances, besides supervising farms and house building. The fact that these households were largely nuclear has implications for greater autonomy of women. Hondagneu-Sotelo's study (1992) finds that long periods of absence of men from their homes has diminished the hegemony of the husband's authority and increased the women's autonomy and influence in the family. On the contrary~ Jetley (1987) argues that though women in migrants' families may be taking decisions regarding the daily subsistence of the family, major decisions such as those pertaining to the purchase and sale of land, and expenditure on ceremonies, among other things, are made by the men, when they visit home. Thus, the structure of the family in terms of authority remains unchanged.

On New Roles and Women's Mobility

In her study of the Saora tribe, where male-only migration is prevalent, Menon (1995) finds that migrants have maintained their links with their lands and families back home through the females left behind, thereby making the women upholders of tradition and protectors of household economic assets and family members. She argues, that these roles, on the one hand, prevent women from leaving, while on the other, they give the men confidence to move out. The main problems faced by women in the absence of male relatives included an increased workload, additional burdens, illness, shortage of food and medicine, labour scarcity, problems in childcare, and indebtedness.

Migration also acts as a catalyst to social change. In a case study of an illiterate Muslim woman, Hameeda, whose husband Jamal was an early migrant to Saudi Arabia, Gulati (1993) narrates: "When Jamal is visiting home, he takes me out to the movies. He never insists that I should cover my head. My mother is very orthodox, and would never have permitted me such liberty. But she is in such great awe of Jamal that she does not interfere with anything he wants me to do on his short visits. Actually, now several women in our neighborhood have stopped covering their heads and go to the movies in short-sleeved blouses. You need someone to take the initiative and introduce these small changes."

Women empowerment has become popular in the development field since 1980s. It is vividly recognized that women empowerment is essential for sustainable economic growth and reduction in poverty in developing countries (Klasen, 1999). Although women empowerment is not a sufficient condition, it is still a necessary condition for development process. In the World Bank Policy Research Report, it is unambiguously suggested that women empowerment is being progressively recognized as an important policy goal for improving not just the well-being of women themselves but also for its positive impact on the family. Economically empowered women play a more active role in household decision-making, with greater bargaining power to increase spending on education and health. Since women empowerment is an imperative part of development process, it also faces different challenges because of its specific regional and religious attributes in the country like India. Migration has opened a new opportunity to take decisions



and responsibilities in household management in absence of male member. As migrants comprise of the most productive force of the population, those left behind are aged people, children and women folk. In the absence of active members it is the women who are required to take responsibility of households and take decision related to farming and domestic activities.

Women of all the category of households have stake in decision making in post-harvest operations but women of migrant households had more stake in taking decision in post-harvest operations. Livestock farming was the second important activity where women empowerment was higher on migrant households.

Decision about choice of the crops/ varieties was the third important activity related to farming where women of migrant households had more stakes in decision making than women of non-migrant households. However, this is the second important farming activity for women of non-migrant households also with respect to their involvement in decision making. The main reason for participation of women in decision making for selecting crops/ varieties on all categories of households is their monopoly in cooking food for the family which probably empowers them to select crops/ varieties. Similar trend of women empowerment has been observed in crop management and purchase of inputs. Women of migrant households were also empowered to take decisions related to children's education and cash management than women of non-migrant households.

Caste was found to be an important contributing factor for changing role of women in migrant households. In majority of lower caste households, the changes in women role from worker to manager were observed. Moreover, nuclear family system was common in lower caste households. This reflects the changes taking place in role of women from family worker to manager in migrant households; but the process is more pronounced on nuclear families, lower caste, and weaker section households.

On the basis of the migration status of the husband, women living in the families were classified into three categories:

1. Non-migrant household: women whose husband had not migrated during the 5 years before the period of survey, termed non-migrants. Of all married women, 58 % were in this non-migrant category, whose husband had not migrated.
2. Co-residence/returned migrant household: women whose husband was a returned migrant and co-residing with her during the survey. Currently married women with a returned migrated husband in the last 5 years accounted for 22 %.
3. Left-behind household: women who were left behind by an out-migrated male member who was absent at the time of the survey. One-fifth of all women were left-behind women whose husbands were residing elsewhere during the survey.

Conclusion:

Although there are limited studies focusing on health and well-being of left-behind female spouses, they usually report a decreased health and well-being compared to non-migrant wives. For example, a study among left-behind female spouses in Mexico reported a higher prevalence of heart disease, overweight, and obesity. A study found a lower score in health-related quality-of-life among left-behind female spouses than non-left-behinds. An Indian study concluded that the migration of husbands does not improve the health of the left-behind wives, but instead puts them at a greater risk of reproductive morbidities. In



relation to the mental ill-health risk among left-behind female spouses, evidence is stronger towards an increased risk. Female spouses of migrant workers may be vulnerable to mental ill-health risk because of the pain of spousal separation and lack of companionship; due to the increased household responsibilities, i.e., undertaking the work, which is mostly done by the husband in a male dominant society; and an increase in daily stressors or being worried about the health and well-being of the migrating husband. Globally, evidence on mental health well-being of female spouses of migrant workers is extremely scarce. Despite the large number of female spouses of migrant workers who are left-behind, none of the studies have examined their mental ill-health risk in Bihar. This aspect must be explored, studied and presented in new form for benefitting those women who are left to handle their houses and families when males of the family have migrated. For those men who migrated to become naxals especially in Magadh region of Bihar, their women must be provided with proper education and new scheme for becoming self-dependent and they should also be empowered politically so that they can stand and save other women from suffering the same pain which they have.

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