

# SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND HEALTH VULNERABILITIES OF SPOUSES OF MALE MIGRANTS IN SOUTH-ASIA: FINDINGS FROM BANGLADESH, INDIA AND NEPAL

Nearly, half the migrants from developing countries reside in other developing countries, and almost 80 percent of South-South migration takes place between countries with contiguous borders [1]. India shares its border with a number of developing countries. According to Census of India 2001\*, immigrants of Asian origin comprise more than 98 percent of all the immigrants currently living in India; 61 percent are of Bangladeshi origin and 10 percent of Nepalese origin [2]. The nature of migration from Bangladesh and Nepal to India differs significantly. Nepalese and Indian citizens can move freely across the border without a passport or visa, live and work, own property and conduct trade or business in either country [3–5]. In contrast, India has a closed border with Bangladesh and citizens require visas to travel and permission to work in the two countries. Nonetheless, evidence from official and unofficial sources indicates that citizens cross over the porous border without much difficulty [4]. It is mostly males who migrate to India from Bangladesh and Nepal. Male migrants may bring their spouses with them or leave them behind depending on the ease of movement across the border and their status stability in the host country [4].

Although migration between Bangladesh, Nepal and India has been widely discussed, there is very little information on spouses of male migrants and their social and health vulnerabilities of on both sides of the border. The Population Council in India and Bangladesh, and CREHPA in Nepal, undertook a multi-country study, with support from the Department for International Development (DFID), to assess the profile, economic conditions, lifestyle, prevailing physical, sexual, and mental health status of spouses



of male migrants in India, and left-behind spouses in Bangladesh and Nepal of male migrants working in India.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in seven sites across three countries—India (Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi); Bangladesh (Jessore and Satkhira); and Nepal (Gulmi, Palpa, and Rolpa). Respondents in the destination country (India) comprised spouses of current male migrants from Nepal or Bangladesh working or residing in India, and respondents in the origin countries (Bangladesh and Nepal) were left-behind spouses of male migrants currently in India. Spouses of current male migrants in India, were females 18 years of age or older, married to a citizen of Bangladesh or Nepal who was currently working in India, and were residing in India for at least 6 months. Left-behind spouses, were females 18 years of age or older, citizens of Bangladesh or Nepal residing in

\* Census 2011 detailed Migration Tables have not been released.

their native place who were married to men currently working in India. A total of 524 spouses of current Bangladeshi male migrants and 504 current Nepalese male migrants were interviewed in India between September–October, 2014. Between October 2014 and January 2015, a total of 250 spouses of male migrants were interviewed in Bangladesh and 270 spouses in Nepal; in-depth interviews were also conducted with 14 spouses in Bangladesh and 15 spouses in Nepal selected from those surveyed.

Structured interviews were conducted by trained researchers to explore the socio-demographic background, nature of economic activities, physical, sexual and mental health status and related behaviours. Height, weight, blood pressure and haemoglobin level were measured. The study was approved by the Nepal Health Research Council and the Institutional Review Board of the Population Council.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *Left behind spouses were younger and more educated than spouses of current migrants living in India*

Spouses of Bangladeshi migrants (SBM) were older than spouses of Nepalese migrants (SNM) in India

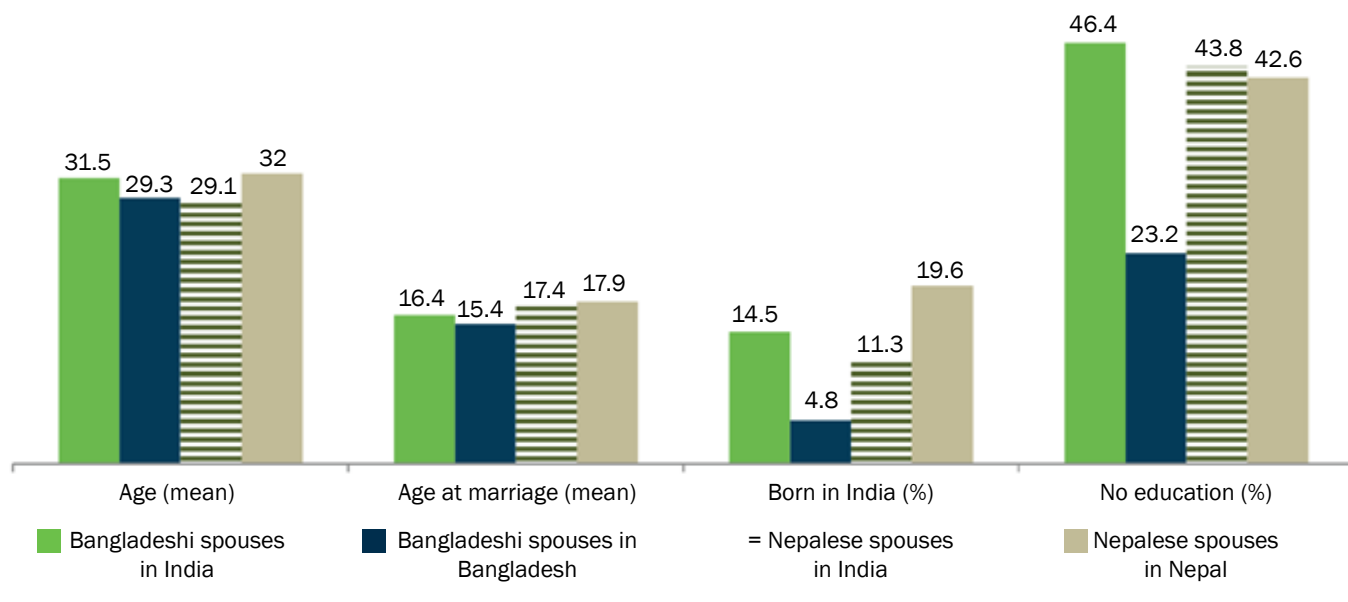
(mean age: 31.5 years vs. 29.1 years;  $p < 0.001$ ). Left-behind spouses of both Bangladeshi (mean age: 29.3 years vs. 31.5 years;  $p < 0.001$ ) and Nepalese (mean age: 29.1 years vs. 32.0 years;  $p < 0.001$ ) migrants were relatively younger than spouses of current migrants in India. Spouses of Nepalese migrants reported a higher mean age at marriage than spouses of Bangladeshi migrants (mean age at marriage: SNM: 17.4 years vs. SBM: 16.4 years;  $p < 0.001$ ). 14.5% of the spouses of current Bangladeshi migrants and 11.3% of the spouses of current Nepalese migrants were born in India.

Among spouses of current migrants, 46.4 percent of Bangladeshi and 43.8 percent of Nepalese spouses had no education. Left-behind Bangladeshi spouses were more educated (76.8% vs. 53.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ) than spouses of current migrants, while no such difference was observed among Nepalese spouses.

### *Spouses in India were more likely to be gainfully employed than left-behind spouses; Nepalese spouses earned more than Bangladeshi spouses*

Bangladeshi migrant spouses in India were more likely to be working (55.5% vs. 29.8%,  $p < 0.001$ ) than Nepalese spouses (Table 1). Most Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrant spouses were engaged

**Figure 1: Socio-demographic background of the spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants, living in India and left behind in country of origin**



in housekeeping and other domestic services (Bangladesh: 46.7% vs. Nepal: 72.7%;  $p < 0.001$ ). A few spouses of Bangladeshi migrants were engaged in construction work (14.4%). Spouses of Nepalese migrants earned a higher income than the spouses of Bangladeshi migrants in India (mean monthly income in INR: 4,556.67 vs. 4,136.15;  $p < 0.001$ ).

In both communities, left-behind spouses were less likely to be working than migrant spouses in India (Bangladeshi: 26.8% vs. 55.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ; Nepalese: 13.3% vs. 29.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Left-behind Nepalese spouses were mostly engaged in agricultural work (75%) while Bangladeshi spouses worked in agriculture (32.8%), handicrafts (19.4%), and other daily wage-based jobs (17.9%).

*I work as agricultural labourer in vegetable fields for harvesting bitter-gourd, ridge gourd. I have to face all the problems. I have to go to market for purchasing goods. I am responsible for educating my children. I have all the responsibilities of my family.*

37-year-old agricultural worker from Satkhira (Bangladesh)

### **Economic conditions improve for left-behind spouses; Nepalese spouses had more immovable assets but also more debt than Bangladeshi spouses**

Bangladeshi migrant spouses were more likely than Nepalese migrant spouses to be living in their own house in India (61.8% vs. 42.1%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Almost all left-behind spouses lived in their own houses (Table 2). Around a quarter of the migrant spouses of both communities in India and left-behind spouses in Bangladesh and Nepal had bank accounts. Left-behind spouses were more likely to report having savings in the bank than migrant spouses in India (Bangladeshi: 63.3% vs. 40.7%;  $p = 0.003$ ; Nepalese: 67.6% vs. 32.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Spouses of current migrants in India were less likely to report owning a house (Bangladesh: 40.3% vs. 94.0%;  $p < 0.001$ ; Nepal: 80.2% vs. 100.0%;  $p < 0.001$ ) or agricultural land (Bangladesh: 22.7% vs. 40.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ; Nepal: 76.0% vs. 98.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ) in their country of origin than left-behind spouses. Overall, Nepalese spouses reported more assets in their country of origin, possibly indicating higher investment in their own country and an intention to return. Despite these assets, left-behind spouses were more likely to report debt (SBM: 45.6%; SNM: 69.3%).

**Table 1: Economic activities of the spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants in India and in country of origin**

	Spouses of Bangladeshi migrants		Spouses of Nepalese migrants	
	Living in India	Left behind in Bangladesh	Living in India	Left behind in Nepal
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Working status				
Working	55.5	26.8	29.8	13.3
Not working	44.5	73.2	70.2	86.7
Economic activity <sup>1</sup>				
Agricultural labour	0.3	32.8	–	75.0
Construction work	14.4	–	–	–
Housekeeping/ domestic work	46.7	9.0	72.7	–
Other wage labour	4.8	17.9	4.0	5.6
Handicraft works	11.7	19.4	8.7	–
Shop-keeping and other petty business	11.7	7.5	8.0	11.1
Other works	10.3	13.4	6.7	8.3
Monthly income in INR <sup>1,2</sup>				
Mean (SD)	4,136.15 (3,377.50)	1,693.06 (1,538.71)	4,556.67 (2,197.75)	2,225.11 (1,143.97)

<sup>1</sup> Among those who were working.

<sup>2</sup> All income converted into INR. 1 Bangladeshi Taka = 0.82 INR; 1 Nepalese Rupee = 0.62 INR.

*It's a village life. There is insufficient production of crops. Even if we work for the whole year, we will not have sufficient food for two months. Also, we had a big family. The children were very small. It was hard for food and clothes. It was very hard to have basic items like salt and oil. It is a must to buy food, so we took loans from money lenders in our village. If we take two thousand rupees loan in a year, the loan doubles with interest and becomes four thousand rupees the next year. So, there was no other option except going to India.'*

34-year-old, home maker, Rolpa (Nepal)

*There has been a change. After getting money from India, I started to raise buffalo and with that our income increased. I then bought goats and started to raise them. I got involved in women's groups. Right now we have started two organizations through an NGO which are named as 'Sahayogi' and 'Jagriti'. I am a treasurer in 'Sahayogi' group.*

36-year-old spouse from Palpa (Nepal)

**Spouses in India reported a higher prevalence of NCDs and RTIs/STIs while left-behind spouses were more likely to exhibit psychological distress.**

The self-reported prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs: diabetes, hypertension or heart

disease) in the past six months was similar among Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants in India (Bangladesh: 19.3% vs. Nepal: 20.6%; not significant) (Fig. 2). However, spouses of Bangladeshi migrants in India were more likely to report symptoms related to RTIs/STIs such as pain/burning during urination, genital ulcers or abnormal vaginal discharge than Nepalese spouses (42.4% vs. 25.2%;  $p < 0.001$ ), mirroring the findings among male Bangladeshi migrants in India. On the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) scale, Bangladeshi spouses in India were more likely to exhibit scores indicating psychological distress (score  $> 15$ ) compared to Nepalese spouses (27.5 vs. 10.3;  $p < 0.001$ ).

A significantly higher proportion of Bangladeshi migrant spouses in India were found to have blood pressure readings suggestive of hypertension (BP  $> 140/90$ ) (16% vs. 12.1%;  $p < 0.01$ ) and moderate to severe anaemia (Hb  $< 10\text{g/dl}$ ) (54.1% vs. 48%;  $p < 0.001$ ) than Nepalese spouses. Interestingly, a higher proportion of spouses of Nepalese migrants were obese (over-weight: BMI  $> 25$ ) compared with spouses of Bangladeshi migrants (31.6% vs. 29.9%;  $p < 0.05$ ).

Left-behind Bangladeshi spouses were more likely to be underweight than the spouses in India (21.7% vs. 12.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ). In both communities, left-behind spouses were more likely to have higher scores

**Table 2: Financial security of the spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants, living in India and left behind in country of origin**

	Spouses of Bangladeshi migrants		Spouses of Nepalese migrants	
	Living in India (%)	Left behind in Bangladesh (%)	Living in India (%)	Left behind in Nepal (%)
Current residence				
Own house	61.8	93.2	42.1	98.1
Rented house	37.4	0.8	51.2	0.7
Relative/friend's house	0.2	6	4.8	1.1
No house	0.6	-	2	-
Has a bank account	28.6	24.0	28.2	25.2
Saved money using a bank account	40.7	63.3	32.4	67.6
Owens a house in country of origin	40.3	94.0	80.2	100
Her family owns agricultural land in country of origin	22.7	40.8	76.0	98.5
Family currently in debt in India	26	2.8	27.6	10
Family currently in debt in country of origin	6.3	45.6	6.7	69.3

on the general health questionnaire, suggestive of psychological distress (Bangladesh: 38.8% vs. 27.5%,  $p=0.006$ ; Nepal: 15.5% vs. 10.3%,  $p=0.016$ ). Women felt lonely and vulnerable, as reported by this 41-year-old spouse from Jessore

*Since my husband is not at home I have to be alone at home. I feel sad because my husband is away from me. If someone comes and say something bad, I won't be able to answer him back. That person will be afraid to say anything if my husband were at home. There is no fear if my*

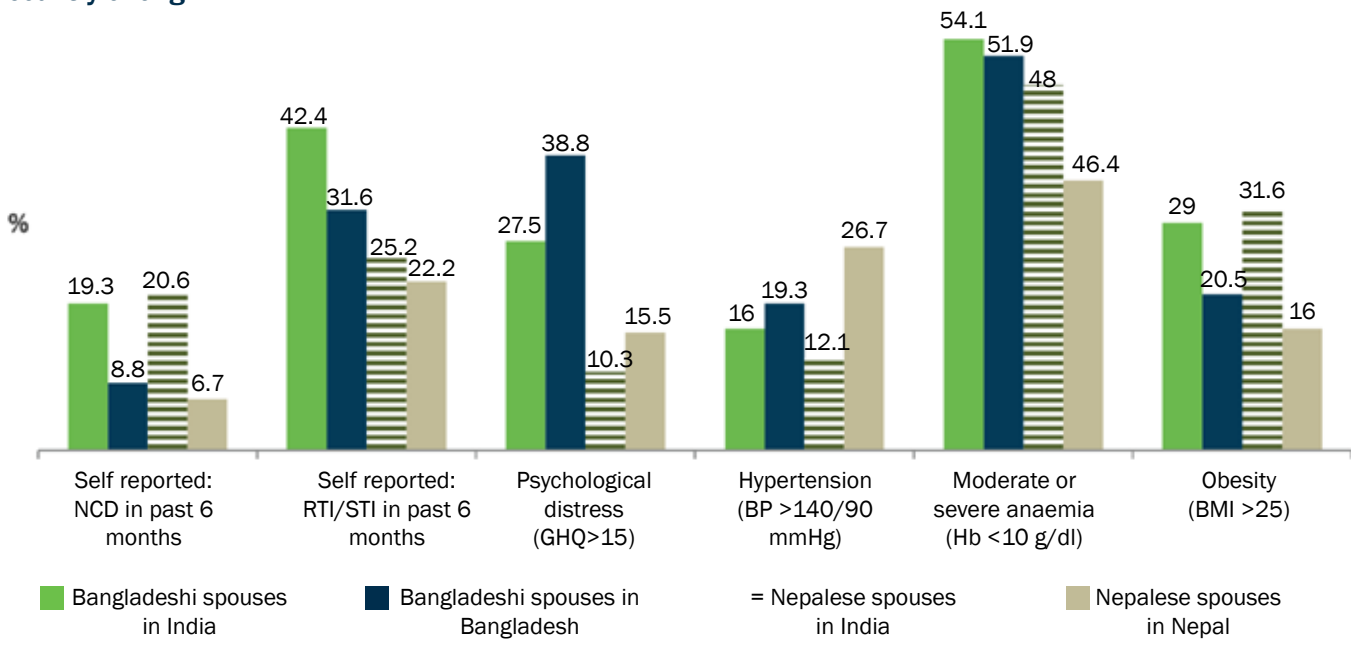
*husband is near me. I am weak because of his absence.*

41-year-old, home-maker, Jessore (Bangladesh)

*He went there to earn and sent us some money to make our life better. But he doesn't send us the money anymore. He doesn't even inquire about our wellbeing. Now I have a lot of miseries with my three children.'*

37-year-old spouse from Satkhira, Bangladesh

**Figure 2: Health status of spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants, living in India and left behind in country of origin**



**Bangladeshi spouses currently living in India had higher number of children while left-behind spouses living in Nepal had more children**

Spouses of Bangladeshi migrants in India had more children than left-behind spouses. In contrast, Nepalese left-behind spouses had a higher number of children than those accompanying their husbands in India (Table 3).

A higher proportion of spouses of Bangladeshi migrants expressed a clear intention to not have more children than spouses of Nepalese migrants in India (70.4% vs. 58.0%;  $p<0.001$ ), but current use of contraceptives was lower among spouses of Bangladeshi migrants (65.9% vs. 73.9%;  $p<0.001$ ). While sterilization (58.1%) was the most common contraceptive choice among spouses of Nepalese migrants in India, Bangladeshi women mainly used sterilization (28.3%) and oral contraceptive pills (19.7%).

**Table 3: Fertility and family planning among the spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants, in India and in the country of origin**

	Spouse of Bangladeshi migrant		Spouse of Nepalese migrant	
	Living in India (%)	Left behind in Bangladesh (%)	Living in India (%)	Left behind in Nepal (%)
Number of living children				
Girls: Mean (SD)	1.2 (1.1)	0.8 (0.8)	1.2 (1.0)	1.4 (1.0)
Boys: Mean (SD)	1.3 (1.1)	1.1 (0.9)	1.0 (1.1)	1.4 (1.3)
Future intention to have children				
Plan to have a child	23.6	28.0	31.1	21.5
Do not plan to have a child	70.4	66.4	58.0	73.3
Undecided/Don't know	6.0	5.6	11.0	5.2
Current contraceptive use*				
Not using	34.1	60.8	26.1	70.7
Pills	19.7	10.2	1.4	4.0
Sterilization	28.3	10.2	58.1	6.6
Injectables	3.0	10.8	0.7	6.1
IUD	5.3	–	4.5	0.5
Condom	6.6	3.0	5.8	2.0
Other methods	3.0	4.8	3.4	10.1

\*Of those who had no intention to have any more /any children.

***Gender norms and attitudes among the Nepalese spouses were better than those among Bangladeshi spouses, where spousal abuse was pervasive***

Spouses of Nepalese migrants in India supported more gender egalitarian norms than their Bangladeshi counterparts, where verbal abuse and physical violence were pervasive. A significant proportion

of spouses of male migrants in India reported experiencing verbal (96.5% of Bangladeshi and 97.4% of Nepalese) and physical (96.9% and 90.8%) violence perpetrated by their husbands in the last 12 months. Left-behind spouses were less likely to report verbal (SBM: 62.0%; SNM: 28.5%) and physical (31.6% and 9.3%, respectively) violence by their husbands in the last 12 months, possibly because their husbands lived away.

**Table 4: Gender norms and attitudes among the spouses of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants, living in India and left behind in country of origin**

	Spouses of Bangladeshi migrants		Spouses of Nepalese migrants	
	Living in India	Left behind in Bangladesh	Living in India	Left behind in Nepal
Husband justified hitting/beating wife in the following situations (% reported "Yes")				
She goes out without telling him	19.8	20.8	8.7	8.1
She neglects the house or children	28.2	19.6	12.1	6.7
She argues with him	26	26	7.7	5.6
She refuses to have sex	10.7	11.2	7.7	1.1
She doesn't cook food properly	17	11.6	5.6	4.8
She shows disrespect for in-laws	33.2	31.6	1.1	7.8
Wife is justified in refusing to have sex with husband in the following situations (% agreed)				
She knows husband has some infection	62	59.6	87.1	86.3
She knows husband had sex with other women	62.6	48	81.5	80.7
She is tired or not in the mood	61.6	54.4	81.7	86.7
If woman refuses sex with husband, he has right to do the following (% agreed)				
Get angry and reprimand her	7.1	24.8	15.7	2.6
Refuse to give her money or financial support	3.6	14.4	6.2	0.7
Use force and have sex	4	15.6	7.7	--
Have sex with other women	2.7	12.4	6.9	--
Verbally abused by husband in past 12 months (%)	73.6	62.0	59.0	28.5
Physically abused by husband in past 12 months (%)	35.3	31.6	21.6	9.3

## CONCLUSION

Spouses of male migrants, while not the primary focus of many studies, are undoubtedly important actors who are equally or sometimes more affected by the phenomenon of migration. This study highlights the vulnerabilities of migrant spouses who accompany their husbands to live in India and those who stay behind in their home countries. Male migrants appear to leave behind more educated spouses, those with children and families, and those that have agricultural and/or residential property in their countries of origin which cannot be left unsupervised and unoccupied for long periods.

Spouses of male migrants lead very different lives depending on whether they accompany their husbands or are left behind. Accompanying Bangladeshi spouses are less advantaged in terms of educational levels and are more likely to work to support the family income but earn less than Nepalese spouses; these findings mirror the economic situation of

male migrants – Bangladeshi male migrants are less educated, are engaged in unskilled, low-paying manual labour, earn less than their Nepalese counterparts, necessitating supplementary income from their spouses [6]. Left-behind spouses from both communities, Nepalese more than Bangladeshi, are less likely to work for a living as they are primarily left behind with the responsibilities of household, property and family maintenance and the lack of employment opportunities available locally; those who work, do so during the period when their husbands are establishing themselves in India. Over time, with monetary remittances received from India, many left-behind spouses become empowered with their improved economic status. This is more evident among Nepalese spouses, almost all of whom reported owning a house and agricultural land. For Bangladeshi left-behind spouses, money transfer is irregular and unreliable, and in many cases may cease completely over time, when their husbands cannot visit Bangladesh due to border restrictions. Less than

half owned agricultural land. At the same time, left behind spouses are worse hit by unpaid debt than migrant spouses in India, more so Nepalese spouses; possibly a result of loans taken to subsist, or to retain or acquire assets (land and house).

There are significant differences in the physical and psychological health of spouses. While left-behind spouses in both Bangladesh and Nepal experience hypertension and psychological distress, spouses in India are more likely to be anemic. Migrant spouses in India are more likely to attend ANC during pregnancy, deliver in a health facility, and understand and use contraception. Interestingly, Bangladeshi spouses in India are more likely to use oral pills, a preference carried over from their country [7]. Left-behind spouses living in rural areas have poorer access to facilities and have less need of family planning as they live away from their husbands. However, they face the risk of unplanned pregnancy when their husbands visit, more so in the case of Nepalese left-behind spouses whose husbands' visits to their home country are frequent and unrestricted. In both communities, spouses living with their migrant husbands in India, experience verbal and physical violence more than those left-behind.

Overall, left-behind spouses appear to live in the security of their home country, receive money, are more self-reliant and empowered to take decisions for their family while also bearing the loneliness and stress of living without their husbands. Accompanying spouses on the other hand face the stress of adapting to a new cultural environment and earning living in a

hostile external environment. There is need for support services in the country of origin for left-behind spouses to facilitate access to health care, psychological counselling and financial planning. Similarly, there is a need for this support in destination areas.

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