

Staying Behind When Husbands Move: Women's Experiences in India and Bangladesh

Overview

The aim of this briefing is to summarise the effects of the temporary absence of migrant men on women's livelihoods in rural West Bengal, India, and northern Bangladesh. It discusses how temporary work migration by men often increases insecurity in women and children living in poor households, by leading to food shortages, financial pressure or ill-health. In these instances, informal social protection from kin or social relations can be instrumental in reducing and overcoming insecurity and hardship for those women who stay behind. Despite the increased risks, the temporary absence of migrant men can sometimes facilitate greater autonomy for women, allowing them to manage their own work and take decisions on household needs.

Those who 'stay behind': an under-researched area

Migration DRC research in West Bengal, India, and northern Bangladesh has sought to investigate seasonal labour migration in these areas, including the impact that this type of migration has on migrant households. The phrase 'staying behind' in this briefing refers to wives of migrant husbands – who either had no wish or no option to migrate – and their children. In these rural areas, men often migrate internally for short-term work in agriculture, construction or other trades, in order to earn extra cash wages to support their household. The study of the difficulties faced by those who stay behind when a member of their household migrates temporarily are under-researched in migration studies. Overall, little is known about the benefits that internal migration may bring for poor, rural families by allowing them to meet basic needs — and perhaps still less is known about the risks and costs of this type of migration for families who stay behind.

Insecurity while staying behind

A study carried out by University of Sussex researchers in 2003 on seasonal migration for rural manual work in Murshidabad District, West Bengal, found that women and children typically stay behind while men migrate for two to four weeks to other parts of the state for seasonal agricultural waged work to earn a

lump sum of cash. The majority of these women are from poor, typically landless, households, and, in the absence of their male counterparts, women are left with limited food and cash. A Migration DRC study in the same region in 2005 showed many impacts on those who stay behind. The subsequent insecurities varied for different households and were often influenced by the interplay of several factors, such as land-holding status, household size and type, worker-dependent ratio, women's access to informal support, duration of migration (from one week to three months) and amount of remittances.

Less-senior women, including young brides and pregnant women, were more vulnerable when they stayed behind when their husbands migrated. These women often felt physically insecure, over-burdened with domestic responsibilities – including increased childcare – and



Women who stayed behind while their husbands migrated are seen here drying paddy in a West Bengal village. Photo © Deeptima Massey.

more obliged to be submissive to senior women in the household. For wives who became ill while their husbands were away, their situation was exacerbated because of their inability to deal with cash or food shortages on their own. This increased their dependence on borrowing from relations. Insecurity decreased when children were older and housework was shared, although this sometimes caused children (especially girls) to miss school because their labour was needed at home.

A comparative perspective on women's experiences of staying behind emerges when the findings of the study in Murshidabad District are contrasted with those in Gaibandha District, Bangladesh, where a parallel study was conducted by Migration DRC researchers in 2005-2006. In Murshidabad, the necessity for husbands to migrate was greater, even in cases where their wives were pregnant. In Gaibandha, migrants often postponed or cancelled their migration in such circumstances, leading to additional economic pressures. In both localities, women who stayed behind experienced emotional stress and dilemmas in response to illnesses. Furthermore, in landless households, food shortages were more common than in households with some land-holdings or livestock – and these shortages were often dealt with by rationing food stocks so that they lasted for longer periods of time.

In Gaibandha, women often moved to their natal homes when their husbands were away in order to reduce household expenditure. In Murshidabad, this option was less frequently taken up, and women's strategies varied according to distance to their natal home, their age and that of their children, and the nature of their relationship with their mothers-in-law. In Bangladesh, women often went to weed groundnut crop or employed day-labourers to work on their own plots of land. They looked after livestock and managed housework and childcare, thus increasing their workload. In West Bengal, this type of work increase was rare as the majority of migrant households were landless. If they owned land, it was either left unattended or wives and older sons took over its cultivation.

Changes in women's behaviour when staying behind

Despite these insecurities, there was a strong correlation between staying behind and increased autonomy for women in Murshidabad District, as they had greater freedom to make decisions regarding housework and

responses to ill-health. The temporary absence of men expanded both the social and the economic activities of most women, as young wives visited their natal homes and grocery shops within adjacent localities with less restriction. When migration was of a longer duration – for two or three months, as in the case of migration for construction work – this further increased women's decision-making powers, especially in providing the family's food supply. However, staying behind did not expand the *economic* activities of all women, which were often influenced by the size of their household and the age of their children. Younger women who wanted to work nevertheless did not if their husbands were opposed to it, while the need to care for young children posed additional restrictions on women working. But sometimes these women had to engage in local wage work, primarily chilli harvesting, to respond to emergency needs such as ill-health, or a delay in a migrant's return and the consequent depletion of food stocks.

Older women enjoyed greater autonomy to do waged work whether men were absent or present. As the children grew up, the ratio of workers to dependents increased, thereby enabling households to better respond to insecurities. Larger households with four to eight members had the advantage of more labour and, consequently, more income. However, in some cases the food and cash insecurities induced by a household member migrating compelled children to start working at a young age. In Murshidabad, young wives encouraged their children to sell home-made snacks or candies at the fair; in Gaibandha children sold home-grown bottle gourds, boys assisted carpenters locally and girls were sent to an adjacent locality to work as maids. Some types of migrant occupation – such as begging by men – and uncertainty about receiving cash remittances from absent family members, were also determining factors that compelled women and children to do paid work in both the study regions.

Seeking informal social protection

Informal social protection encompassed a wide range of support, and varied widely in different households; it sometimes involved unequal or conflicting relationships and came at a financial or social cost. Migration DRC research investigated the role of informal social protection, which was referred to locally as *sahajyo*, in helping households cope when men migrated. This involved maintaining good connections with various

social relations, and formed the basis of the support which women relied upon for food and cash when their husbands were away. There were individual variations in the type of support accessible to women, based on their access to informal support networks and their distance from their natal home.

In Murshidabad, informal social protection for young wives and those who were ill included the visit of an untrained local doctor during an emergency, the help of neighbours to do cooking, or in-laws offering cash or bringing medicines and weekly rations (subsidised food grains) from a nearby town. Young wives also acknowledged support from mothers and aunts, who often attended to them during pregnancy or illness, looked after children and brought food. Distance to natal home, bearing sons rather than daughters and the amount and type of dowry all played an important role in influencing the informal social protection that wives could obtain when their husbands migrated. For women who stayed behind with their adult or adolescent offspring, the help given by their older children to do housework and paid work was emphasised more than borrowing food from kin or neighbours. Likewise, support from mothers-in-law could be limited by their negative attitudes towards their daughters-in-law, and was at times conditional on favours in return. However, some women benefited from their mother-in-law also being their paternal aunt, due to the common practice of cross-cousin marriage in the locality, which ensured greater support.

A comparison of the access to informal social protection in the two study sites presented some glaring contrasts. In Gaibandha, the informal social judiciary system, or the *shalish*, formed of wealthy and influential men, often provided support to families who stayed behind by giving them a monthly payment to service outstanding debts. Families who stayed behind also had access to formal social protection through six NGOs in the area which provided micro-credit, healthcare and flood protection. In contrast, in Murshidabad these types of support were not available, and consequently there was a greater reliance on informal social connections such as kin, friends and neighbours. Poor women depended on wealthy kin such as fathers-in-law, brothers or brothers-in-law to provide agricultural work to deal with cash deficits. However, employment was not always offered to women, as the



Women who have stayed behind in a West Bengal village in Murshidabad district work on a quilt in the village courtyard. Photo © Deeptima Massey.

prestige of the family was considered to be at stake. Some women expressed hostility towards wealthy men who refused to offer them groceries on credit and prevented them from using the telephone without charge.

Policy implications

This briefing has explored the experiences of women who stay behind when husbands migrate in two study localities with broadly similar cultural norms and agricultural systems. It has focused on the strategies these women use to respond to various hardships. The temporary absence of men can be significant in shaping the lives and experiences of those who stay behind and policies must respond to this. Policies should take concerted action to address various dimensions of physical, food, health and economic insecurities for women and children staying behind in poor households. In relation to this, there are a number of potential policies which development actors might pursue, including:

- Taking steps to identify the role of social resources and informal social protection mechanisms in helping families who stay behind, in order to find ways of further promoting these relationships.
- Supporting food security schemes and eliminating delays in the transfer and issuing of ration cards for women and children, to avoid food shortages in poor households being exacerbated when a member of the household is away from home.
- There is a potential role for development agencies or NGOs in providing various formal social protection measures to families who have stayed behind when migrants move for temporary labour migration.

Key readings

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Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

The Migration DRC aims to promote policy approaches that will help to maximise the potential benefits of migration for poor people, whilst minimising its risks and costs. Since 2003, the Migration DRC has undertaken a programme of research, capacity-building, training and promotion of dialogue to provide the strong evidential and conceptual bases needed for such policy approaches. This knowledge has also been shared with poor migrants, with the aim of contributing both directly and indirectly to the elimination of poverty. The Migration DRC is funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development, although the views expressed in this policy briefing do not express DFID's official policy.

How to Contact Us

This briefing was written by Deeptima Massey with contributions from Abdur Rafique, Ben Rogaly and Janet Seeley. It is one output of a Migration DRC project entitled 'Social Protection by and for Temporary Work Migrants in Bangladesh and India'. For further information on this work please contact Saskia Gent (s.e.gent@sussex.ac.uk), Communications Manager for the Migration DRC.

For more information on the Migration DRC, please contact:
Sussex Centre for Migration Research
Arts C, University of Sussex
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, United Kingdom
tel: +44 1273 873394
fax: +44 1273 873158
email: migration@sussex.ac.uk
web: www.migrationdrc.org