

I am Woman and Man: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Indian-Gulf Emigrants on Left-Behind-Families in Bihar and Kerala

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This study examines the changes in women's decision-making roles and mobility due to their husband's migration within societies where patriarchal structures are still rigid. This study is based on the understanding that these societies' patriarchal structures and the parochial mentality have not yet been transformed by modernity, especially towards assigning women roles in the community. However, because of male emigration to the Gulf and remittance inflows, power dynamics in the migratory household shifts, and wives take up the dual role of a man and a woman, creating space for themselves by making everyday decisions, which gradually increases their autonomy and empowers them. The autonomy is defined as the ability to influence or manage one's own environment. The paper applies this framework to the context of women's empowerment and their ability to make decisions within the household in the absence of the male head. To study the impact, 101 sample households were surveyed in the two districts of Siwan (Bihar) and Malappuram (Kerala) following observational methods and an open-ended questionnaire. The results were drawn by analysing data following analytical methodology. The results are consistent with the notion that educated wives enjoy more decision-making roles and mobility outside the community than less educated wives, who have fewer decision-making rights and less mobility with increased daily chores and responsibilities. The study correspondingly intends to distinguish how wives of low-skilled and high-skilled workers perform and renegotiate their social roles. The study suggests that male migration and remittance inflows shift power dynamics within households, allowing wives to play a dual role and gradually increase their autonomy, mobility, and empowerment.

Keywords: Indian Emigrant Worker, Gulf, Women, Left-behind, Empowerment

Parveen, (38 years old) is sitting on her concrete living room floor with her son and two of her daughters on a hot summer afternoon in the village of Siwan, Bihar, sorting through rice in preparation for cooking. Her hand is moving quickly while separating and discarding tiny rice gravel. Parveen reflected on how her life had changed since her husband left for Saudi Arabia Seven years ago, "I look after our fields and our animals..." Right now, my husband told me to repair some walls, so construction is going on in my house. After his (my husband's) migration, I knew all the responsibility would fall on my shoulders. I am in charge of everything and am

responsible for all the work my husband used to do. Before, I used to cook, clean, and take care of the kids and my in-laws.” “It is a lot of work, isn’t it?” Now the man of the house is earning outside, so the woman will have to do the man’s work here, will she not? So, within a few years of his migration, I became both a woman and a man.

This declaration by Parveen is an example of what is referred to as gendered shifts, which is the transformation of gender roles in the communities of Bihari and Malayali migrants. Migration (in these two communities) is gendered (because it is linked with the recognition of male out-migration) and gendering specifically as women become part of the process.¹ This concept underscores that migration is not merely influenced by pre-existing gender relations in a patriarchal society but actively reshapes them. Both men and women play integral roles in this transformation. In a patriarchal society, men typically wield greater authority within households and serve as primary financial providers. Their access to household resources and decision-making power not only enables them to initiate the migration process² but also profoundly affects the entire migration journey. The departure of a husband for migration is a pivotal moment, especially for women. It disrupts established gender roles and expectations, prompting women to assume new roles and responsibilities and assert themselves in ways they may not have within the household previously. For instance, in the absence of their spouses for extended periods, some women gain access to household resources, decision-making authority, and networks that empower their mobility beyond their local community, enabling them to migrate and reunite with their husbands in their destination countries. In this context, the migration process underlines numerous ways in which women exhibit, act out, and (re)negotiate their gendered selves (associated with capacitating women to make household decisions, handle remittances, and nurture their agency and autonomy in the absence of their husbands/ male head of the family). It is also a dynamic process in which gendered identities affect migration, and transnational movement alters gender identities.³

This debate stems from the nexus of gender, family, and homeland among Gulf migrants with a connection to the Siwan (Bihar) and Malappuram (Kerala) districts in India. Following the oil boom of the 1970s, a significant number of individuals from India migrated to the Gulf region, primarily as a temporary workforce. These young men ventured to the Gulf in search of employment and improved economic prospects, leaving their families behind in their home country. In the Gulf nations, there was a growing demand for cost-effective labor in various sectors, including construction, hospitality, and domestic services, to meet their basic economic requirements. These migrants are categorized into two types: ‘blue-collar’ workers, who typically have lower levels of education and are employed in roles that require low or semi-skilled labor, and ‘white-collar’ workers, who occupy managerial, supervisory, or professional positions and possess higher educational qualifications.

¹ Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1992). Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men. *Gender and Society*, 6(3), 393-415.

² Hondagneu-Sotelo, “Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints”

³ Boehm, D. A. (2008). “Now I am a man and a woman!” Gendered moves and migrations in a transnational Mexican community. *Latin American Perspectives*, 35(1), 16-30.

The development scenarios of Bihar, poverty, poor education, weak governance, and lack of economic opportunities compel people to migrate both within the country and abroad.⁴ The low education and less technical skill and knowledge supplement the process of migration to low or semi-skilled jobs (blue-collar). The practice of emigrating to the Gulf from Bihar is widespread among Muslim households. Based on data collected from Muslim employees who emigrate (the majority of whom are young), it has been observed that this act of emigration significantly mitigates the scarcity of jobs and financial opportunities in their hometowns and villages, particularly in the Siwan district and Bihar at large. On the other hand, the majority of educated unemployed job seekers migrate to the Gulf from Kerala both in low-skilled and high-skilled (white-collar) sectors. Given that Malappuram is a district with a Muslim majority within the predominantly Hindu state of Kerala⁵, a substantial portion of Muslim individuals undertake migration to the Gulf countries as a choice. According to the Kerala Survey report (2018), Muslims make up about 42 per cent of all emigration from Kerala, followed by Hindus and Christians. Further, Kerala accounts for overall 18 percent of households having at least one emigrant. Of them, 33 percent of these emigrant households belong to the Muslims and the largest share of remittances comes from these Muslim households in Malappuram.⁶ In this sense, the households from these two districts have pre-existing migratory cultures and see migration as an adaptive measure in which families secure financial resources. In our survey, economic opportunity and the culture of migration⁷ were cited as motivators for their decision to relocate to the Gulf region.

According to the annual reports and emigration data from the Ministry of External Affairs, India, Kerala had held the distinction of being the primary source of labor migration to the Gulf countries before 2015. However, in the wake of the global financial crisis affecting the Gulf region, the number of migrants started to dwindle. By 2019, Kerala witnessed a notable decrease of approximately 21.22 lakh workers⁸ returning from the Gulf countries. This decline could be attributed to a range of factors⁹, including poor socio-economic working, and living conditions, issues like wage theft and low remuneration – exacerbated by an increasing influx of laborers from other Indian states, such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, as well as neighboring countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, leading to a surplus of cheap labor and downward pressure on wages. Additionally, many Keralites sought to migrate to

⁴ “*Status of Muslim Youth in Bihar: Quantitative and Qualitative Assessment*. (2017, April). A study sponsored by United Nations Population Fund, Bihar Office, Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI).

⁵ Census, (2011). <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/district/275-malappuram.html>

⁶ Rajan, S. I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2019). *Emigration and Remittances: New Evidence from The Kerala Migration Survey, 2018* (Working Paper No. 483). Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.

⁷ Kumpikaitė V., et al., (2021). *Migration Culture: The Drivers Behind the Movement of People*. In: *Migration Culture*. Springer, Cham.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), *Annual Reports* of various years and reports from emigrate.gov. (2021).

⁹ News Click. (2019, March). *As Gulf Dream Fades, Keralites Start Returning Home*. <https://www.newsclick.in/Keralites-Malayalis-Migration-Decreased-Gulf-Countries#:~:text=Explaining%20the%20reason%20for%20the%20decline%20in%20emigration%2C,Kerala%20attained%20replacement%20of%20fertility%20level%20in%20around%201987>.

Europe. Since 2015, Bihar emerged as a second highest¹⁰ annual labour emigration state after Uttar Pradesh to the Gulf countries. Furthermore, both Malappuram and Siwan are the highest labour-sending districts from their respective states making them ideal cases for a comparative analysis.

Most of the research literature on migration focuses on the various unfolding intricacies of the migration process, its origins, and its destinations. Some studies have been conducted from an economic perspective, while others have examined migration from a gender standpoint. The relationship between migrant males and non-migrant women is strongly intertwined in many ways. Although some studies have investigated the interrelation between male truancy and women's decision-making and autonomy within the family, based on comparative analyses of wives of migrant workers and wives of non-migrant individuals in the community, others have documented the adverse effects of husbands' migration on their left-behind wives, such as how spousal separation leads to unstable marriages, emotional discomfort, and a lack of interest in one's spouse. In addition, the husband's long-term absence from the house influences women's roles or identity as traditional caretakers or, in their more recent roles, as resource managers, including handling finances. This research takes a step further by examining the multiple mechanisms through which male migration leads to increased autonomy (a renegotiation of gender roles) by left-behind wives. Migration itself is viewed as a mechanism foundational in directing women's autonomy and empowerment. It also creates other mechanisms like the adoption of new roles and responsibilities. This encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, spanning household management (involving decisions related to matters like food, clothing, children's education, and healthcare, as well as visits to relatives & neighbours, and sharing of items with them), agricultural decision-making, access to the labour market, and financial duties (including aspects such as credit accessibility, budgeting, savings, and the management of remittances). These new roles also entail the expansion of social and community networks among wives of migrant workers and beyond, alongside achieving residential independence. The increased mobility of women, necessitated by their husband's absence, results in more frequent visits and interactions at places such as banks and local markets, eventually enhancing their comfort in navigating public spaces. Notably, these roles and responsibilities, traditionally handled by men in both the household and society, have seen a transformative shift. While performing these roles, women attain a dual nature of both a man and a woman. In this article, we investigate this role transformation and how it is becoming an enabler for empowerment and autonomy. We also investigate how the autonomy experienced by wives of high-skilled (Malappuram) workers differs from that experienced by wives of low-skilled (Siwan) workers. It was hypothesized that men's migration gives more autonomy to educated wives with more decision-making roles and mobility outside the community. The less educated wives gain access to decision-making rights, including mobility, expansion outside their family network, and an increase in their daily tasks and responsibilities.

To study the correlation between migrations and an increase in decision-making and mobility among left-behind wives after their husbands migrate to the Gulf, this

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). (2015). *Annual Report 2015*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs.

study follows an analytical approach. From both districts, a total of 101 samples were analysed, showing a positive impact of migration on left-behind wives, particularly the less educated wives (of low-skilled workers), who have gained significant decision-making powers, and mobility, and learned to renegotiate social roles. The observational method and an open-ended questionnaire served as data collection tools through the snowball technique. The 42 left-behind women respondents were from Malappuram (high-skilled workers' wives), and 59 were from Siwan (low-skilled workers' wives) households who were interviewed. The field study mainly focused on Muslim households, as mentioned above due to the predominance of the culture of migration and earning opportunities in the Gulf countries among Muslim households in these two districts.

Defining Autonomy

This study adopts the definition of autonomy from Rothschild¹¹ and Dyson and Moore¹² who defined female autonomy as the ability to influence or manage one's own environment. We explore this idea in the context of women's empowerment and their ability to make decisions within the household in the absence of their male head. The long absence of husbands from the home gives women who are left behind the autonomy to control their own lives and make decisions that affect the environment around them, including their children, husbands, and other family members. The longer a woman is separated from her spouse, the greater a woman's ability to make decisions and steer her life, and the greater her sense of autonomy. Rothschild argues that a woman's level of autonomy is related to both socio-cultural and economic factors. However, factors derived from men, such as marital and family ties, also impact a woman's autonomy, while a woman's ability to earn income through activities can increase her sense of autonomy. Furthermore, women who engage in productive pursuits also experience an increase in autonomy and social recognition.

While exploring the relationship between male migration and female autonomy, it is suggested that when the male head of the household migrates and is absent for an extended period¹³ this leads to an increase in women's autonomy. The authors have outlined several factors contributing to this increase in autonomy, such as the ability to move outside of the community, control over remittance, make major decisions, control household structure, and take on additional responsibilities. These additional responsibilities or engagements encompass childcare, elderly care, maintaining extended familial relationships (such as visiting relatives, attending weddings, funerals, and socio-religious ceremonies, as well as lending or borrowing money to start a small business or taking up a job), financial management, home maintenance, and even engagement in agricultural work, particularly in rural areas including the decision about hiring labour. Women may also become more actively involved in community activities such as local governance and social projects, playing an important role in making educational and healthcare decisions for their children.

¹¹ Rothschild, CS (1982), 'Female Power, Autonomy and Demographic Change in the Third World'. In R. Anker, M. Buviniv, & N. Yousef (Eds.), *Women's Roles and Population Trends in the Third World* (pp.117-132). London, UK: Croom Helm.

¹² Dyson, T., and M. Moore (1983). 'On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy, and Demographic Behavior in India'. *Population and Development Review*, 9(1): 35-60.

¹³ Anderson, S., and M. Eswaran (2009). 'What Determines Female Autonomy? Evidence from Bangladesh'. *Journal of Development Economics*, 90(2): 179-91.

Some women seek income-generating options, such as finding work or starting small enterprises, to contribute to the family's finances. Providing emotional assistance for family members, particularly youngsters, becomes an essential component of their new responsibilities.

Other factors such as education, age at marriage, age gap, number of children, family structure, and length of husband's absence from the household play a role in determining a woman's level of independence and autonomy.¹⁴ In the context of the Gulf, low-skilled or semi-skilled workers (i.e., blue-collar) experience lengthier absences from the household compared to skilled or highly skilled workers (i.e., white-collar). This is because the nature of work in the Gulf allows skilled professionals to frequently visit their homes in their home country and reunite with their families in the destination country, where immediate family members have the privilege of visiting. This cyclical pattern of short-term presence and absence enables skilled workers to monitor household affairs more frequently compared to low-skilled workers, who experience a longer period of physical absence from the household. The notable absence of husbands significantly shapes the experiences of women in these households, intricately sculpting their developing roles and responsibilities within the complex framework of migration. It is observed that male migration from India to the Gulf region has a positive impact on marital dynamics, as women leverage their husbands' absence as an opportunity to assert greater power and autonomy within the household.

Socio-Economic Profile of Sample Household

The analysis comes from the collected data. Possible parameters were taken into consideration like, the migrant wives' age, migrants' age, educational level of both the migrant and non-migrant wives, type of house, type of family system, husbands' absence from the house, wife's occupation, migrant's occupation, wives' savings or income, migrant husband's income, remittance sent by migrant husband, remittance spent by wife, number of children (especially male child), wives mobility before and after husband's migration, property owned by migrants and non-migrant wives, vehicle and household goods & appliances possessed by non-migrating wives. As indicated above these parameters act as a 'women's power base'¹⁵ in households which enable them to participate more in the decision-making process.

The study area -Siwan district, is predominantly Hindu-dominated, with Muslims accounting for only 34 percent of the population.¹⁶ Hindus are a minority in Malappuram, accounting for approximately 27.60 per cent of the population.¹⁷ In Malappuram, most respondents were found living in a nuclear family system, but most of the respondents in Siwan were recorded as living in an extended family system. In Malappuram, the majority of migrant families were found to be living in

¹⁴ Abadian, S. (1996). 'Women's Autonomy and Its Impact on fertility'. *World Development*, 24(12): 1793-1809. Heaton, T.B., T.J. Huntsman, and D.F. Flake (2005). 'The Effects of Status on Women's Autonomy in Bolivia, Peru, and Nicaragua'. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 24(3): 283- 300.

¹⁵ Rothschild, (1982). '*Female Power, Autonomy and Demographic Change in the Third World*'.

¹⁶ Siwan, About District, District Profile. <https://siwan.nic.in/about-district/>.

¹⁷ Census, 2011. Malappuram District Religion Data - Hindu/Muslim <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/district/275-malappuram.html>.

semi-urban or urban regions, while in Siwan, the majority of respondents were found to be living in rural communities.

Age is crucial in determining an individual's physical and psychological well-being, as it significantly impacts their socio-economic activities. Most migratory spouses from Malappuram were recorded above the age of 48, whereas the average age of migrating males in Siwan was 30. This age gap implies that young people are travelling to the Gulf in greater numbers from Siwan than those of Malappuram, who have been working and living in the Gulf for decades. In the case of non-migrant wives from Malappuram, the majority are between the ages of 35 to 50 years. These young and middle-aged women were mainly observed and found to be living separately along with their kids. On the other hand, some younger and recently married non-migrating females were recorded, ranging from 18 to 28 from Siwan, but the majority of women were between the ages of 28 to 50. Most non-migrated wives agreed that they married their migrant husbands when they were quite young and spent their vital young adulthood apart from them, which has socio-psychological consequences. These non-migratory families had an average of three children, with more females than males. In the absence of their migrant husband, these children provide a sense of protection and emotional comfort.

Another major factor is the education level of left-behind women. In Malappuram, the overall women literacy rate is 91.62 per cent¹⁸ as compared to Siwan which is 58.66 per cent.¹⁹ In Malappuram, the maximum number of women were found to have a university/college or professional degree. Some of these women continued working after their husbands emigrated to the Gulf, and many expressed a desire to work or pursue their higher education. In the Siwan district, fewer left-behind wives are recorded studying till high school or college, while a greater number of women are uneducated or have only completed primary education. When asked about their desire to work, start a new business, or pursue further education, many women stated that their husbands would disapprove and that their primary responsibility is to care for their home and children.

Occupation plays a key role in determining socio-economic level. Occupations are largely based on qualifications in education. Indian workers in the Gulf countries are mainly categorized into blue-collar group jobs (i.e. carpenter, driver, mason and electrician) and white-collar jobs (site manager, supervisor, doctor and engineer). Therefore, their occupations are based mainly on the level of educational qualification. Most blue-collar migrant workers earn remittances between 25,000 to 50,000 per month, and a white-collar worker earns 50,000 or above. Wives of blue-collar workers receive thirty to forty thousand rupees per month of their husbands' earnings, while wives of white-collar workers receive forty to fifty thousand rupees for household expenses and other critical work.

The length of the husband's absence from the house and the remittance he sends back have significant impacts on the left behind women. When husbands are gone for

¹⁸ Census, (2011). Malappuram District Population, Caste, Religion Data (Kerala). <https://www.censusindia.co.in/district/malappuram-district-kerala-592#:~:text=The%20average%20literacy%20rate%20in%20Malappuram%20for%20urban,96.31%25%20literate%20while%20female%20literacy%20stood%20at%2092.35%25.>

¹⁹ Census, (2011). Siwan District Population, Caste, Religion Data (Bihar) [https://www.censusindia.co.in/district/siwan-district-bihar-218.](https://www.censusindia.co.in/district/siwan-district-bihar-218)

longer periods, their wives often find themselves in a position of increased authority by making more decisions and handling more financial responsibility within the family. Left-behind women's decision-making and autonomy seem to increase with both the length of their husband's absence and the amount of money he sends back. The average duration of a husband's absence is 3 years from both the districts. This process enhances the wife's ability to save or earn money. The wife's savings may increase proportionally to the husband's time spent working abroad. When women save money, it gives them a sense of autonomy and relative financial independence in the absence of their husbands.

Family dynamics (type of family system) are seen as a major determinant that influences women's position and role in household decision-making. The number of people in a family is assumed to have a negative correlation with each member's ability to make decisions. Wives living in the nuclear family system were recorded more in Malappuram as compared to wives living in the extended family system in Siwan. When it comes to making important socio-economic decisions within the household, women in traditional extended families or joint family systems (living with the husband's mother, father, brother, and sisters) often have less say than the nuclear family system. On the other hand, decision-making that requires women to go beyond household and increases their mobility, such as visiting shops and markets, hospitals, and banks, making significant household purchases like furniture and vehicles, as well as paying visits to relatives, and attending weddings or any social gatherings, often requires the presence of someone elderly, either a male or female, in both types of family systems. However, this presence cannot be considered as a check on autonomy, because it does not alter or change the decisions already taken regarding such activities.

Decision-Making Power and Changing Gender Roles

Migration from both the districts is essentially male and has become part and parcel of their everyday life. These migrating men and their non-migrating women come from societies where patriarchal structures are still in their rigidities as modernity has not yet penetrated to change the parochial mentality, especially towards assigning women's roles in the community.²⁰ However, migration has significantly shifted the power dynamics within these households, mainly attributable to husbands' absence and the subsequent inflow of remittances. Additionally, the prolonged truancy of husbands often intensifies the burden on women's shoulders, regardless of whether they engage in these tasks willingly or reluctantly. In both scenarios, women frequently take charge or make decisions on responsibilities, highlighted in the above sections, during their husbands' absence. Continuing over an extended period, women seamlessly assume roles and responsibilities that are traditionally associated with men.

In light of this, these wives play the dual role of a man and woman in the household and create a required space for themselves which gradually increases their autonomy and empowers them. In a family where one or more than one male member(s) has migrated, the woman of the same household must graduate enough to perform the

²⁰ Mustaqeem, M. (2020). "Working Abroad while Families at Home: Negotiating Patriarchal Role for Women in South Asia": A Case Study of Gopalganj District of Bihar, India. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 8(3), 135-145.

work and handle responsibilities that were previously handled by males. Taking the example of Mariyam, a 52-year-old living in a joint family system with her in-laws and four children in Siwan, her husband Ashfaq works as a driver in the UAE. When Mariyam's father-in-law fell ill and later passed away, she had to make decisions regarding the funeral since her husband couldn't be present to attend the rituals. Reflecting on this, *Mariyam mentioned*, "My husband has missed many happy and sad occasions as he cannot visit us frequently. When his father died, he couldn't come. Our boys are young, and his younger brothers are also not present at home like him. I had to arrange his father's funeral as my mother-in-law couldn't do anything due to her prolonged sickness. I informed everyone, visited the market to buy necessary items, organized the funeral, and looked after the family in his absence." Reema Hassan 57 years old, living in a nuclear family with her two daughters in Malappuram whose husband has worked in Qatar for more than 15 years, shared that her husband's visit for their elder daughter's engagement was postponed due to his office commitments. Consequently, she had to complete all the essential preparations in anticipation of his arrival for the ceremony.

The change in the degree and direction of decision-making depends on many factors like women's education level & age, husband's age, and income level, immigrant male's involvement in the household, the composition of the migrant family system, duration of contact between migrant and its left behind a wife and the husband's continuation of employment abroad. In this regard, education has become a tool for social change, promoting new values & knowledge and influencing the decision-making of women, which is also an essential indicator of women's empowerment. It helps women break free from the social and family constraints of patriarchal tradition and enables them to make decisions and shoulder responsibilities at home and outside the community. At the same time, economic empowerment increases their negotiation power and financial decisions within the family. Research has proved that there is a direct link between education level and women's decision-making power in the family and positively associated with women's autonomy²¹—these are essential indicators of empowerment, autonomy, and gender equality.

Longer truancy of male absence from the home often provides that space for women to perform new roles and responsibilities previously associated with men. Another powerful predictor of women's decision-making authority is family structure²², the kind of family system in which she resides. If a migrant's wife lives in an extended family system, an older person in the family becomes responsible for the household decision in her husband's absence. These migrant wives must abide by the decisions made by the older person in the house compared to the nuclear family system in which wives are wholly and solely responsible for new roles and duties. Women take on these new roles and responsibilities with utmost importance, re-negotiating existing traditional gender norms and division of labour. These new

²¹ Acharya, Yubraj., (2008). "Women's education and intra-household autonomy: evidence from Nepal." *Journal of Development and Social Transformation* 5, no. 1: 5-12; Fatima, Duryab, (2014). "Education, employment, and women's say in household decision-making in Pakistan."

²² Khare, Shikha. (2021). "Impact of women's education on decision making regarding their children affairs." *J Sci Res* 65: 144-149.

roles may be associated with greater spending authority, economic decision-making authority, and freedom of mobility, all of which have generally been used to characterize women's autonomy. It was hypothesised that wives empowered with education were projected to have more decision-making rights and mobility outside the home than less educated wives, who were expected to have fewer decision-making rights and mobility as their daily domestic responsibilities increased. Here, we also investigated how differently women of low-skilled and high-skilled migrant workers gain their autonomy and carve out decision-making roles within or outside of the household. We asked a series of questions to our respondents to test this hypothesis. Empowered with education facilitates non-migrating females to make better financial decisions and better management of the household.

This can be illustrated by the female literacy rate in Malappuram (female literacy rate is 91.62 percent), which is higher than in Siwan (below the national average, i.e., 79.04 percent)²³. These wives were expected to have more agency in the household and were once responsible for exclusively domestic work. Take the example of Fatima, she lives in a nuclear family system with her two sons. She got married to her migrant husband soon after completing her graduation. Her daily life is profoundly different from older generations of women or her neighbours whose partners have not emigrated. She has notable independence and recognizes her autonomy. She owns a two-wheeler, which she uses to travel to surrounding towns for family visits or to the market or bank to withdraw the monthly remittance that her husband sent. She is responsible for the family money and her two sons' schooling. As she mentioned, *"My husband encourages me to continue my study frequently, pointing out that I have plenty of daytime available after taking care of the children and the household. However, he never fails to remind me of my responsibilities, not just as a mother but also as a homemaker. We both decided that I should join a professional degree course that could be useful to me in the future while he is away."*

In Malappuram, some women continue working after their husbands' migration, some join their husbands in the Gulf. Many expressed a desire to work or pursue their education. Many a time, women, after their marriage, are urged to seek job paths that are more desirable in the husband's views and require less effort. Men's labour migration may lead to women's employment only if she is empowered with education, jobs are accessible, women have the abilities to do them, and women's employment is considered normal or acceptable. However, these choices are determined by men whose approval is primarily pursued by women as a form of obligation. Rothschild calls these as limitations on autonomy and Debora associates these limitations with male reassertion of masculinity and control.²⁴

Women in similar cultures and circumstances encounter different patriarchal obstacles and negotiate or resist differently. However, we discovered a different set of outcomes in the Siwan district. Certainly, new roles and responsibilities within the family change the position of both women and men, and reconstruct the gender role, but how liberated do women feel from the migration of their husbands from the

²³ Census. (2011). *Literacy in India*. Retrieved from <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>

²⁴ Rothschild, (1982), *'Female Power, Autonomy and Demographic Change in the Third World'*. Boehm. "Now I am a man and a woman!" Gendered moves and migrations in a transnational Mexican community.

Siwan district? Whether she lives in a nuclear family or an extended family system, or how much they influence the decisions. Women in Siwan rely on men to assist them anytime they need, want to leave the community or visit places/relatives. The one male member is generally there to assist them. He could be her in-brother-in-law or father-in-law, her son or brother, a male relative, or someone from her extended family. This is because most migrants from Siwan tend to exercise rigid domination in their houses, believing that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers who cannot go beyond four walls. Due to this constraint, their outdoor mobility is frequently restricted but not blocked.

Suraiya 43 years old, having primary education and a mother of four from Siwan recalls “*Even after many years of my husband’s departure to the Gulf. I still can’t leave the house alone; formerly, my nephew would accompany me to the market, to the doctor, and other places, and now either with my son or sometimes my elder daughter.*” The above explanation shows that women in Siwan societies often require legitimate reasons to go outside their homes. Women in these societies often see this as an opportunity to be mobile outside their home whether they do so in the company of a male or any other older female where they traditionally lack access to the spaces. This does not only show the prevailing traditional patriarchal society of Bihar that women belong at home but also the reassertion of male dominance.

Based on Rothschild’s model of ‘women’s power base’, the results from the study and the narratives given above lend credence to the idea that wives who are educated and who live in a nuclear family system have a greater likelihood of having rights to participate in decision-making and of having greater mobility outside the house or within the community. This contrasts with less educated wives who live in the families of their migrant husbands, who typically have a greater burden in household responsibilities, fewer rights to participate in decision-making within the household, and limited mobility except when it is necessary.

Left-Behind Woman: (re)Negotiating Social Roles

Migrants maintain highly conservative ideas regarding the inflow and utilization of remittances, outside mobility by women, and the dread of women taking over as heads of the family. However, research suggests that women negotiate²⁵ differently than men and are strongly affected in terms of social power and position.²⁶ The male-dominated migration considerably alters the intra-household power resulting in significant changes in women’s roles and responsibilities in domestic and social spheres. As a result of these changes, women frequently fill the role of *de facto*²⁷ house head in their husbands’ absence and modify their social roles. Here, we will discuss how the traditional social role (a woman’s day-to-day responsibilities include caring for the home, her husband & his family, and children) of women influences and re-negotiates their financial choices (savings) or consumption after their husbands’ migration.

²⁵ Muskan, Mustaqeem, “Working Abroad While Families at Home”.

²⁷ Desai, Sonalde, and Manjista Banerji. “Negotiated identities”.

²⁸ De Haas, H., & Van Rooij, A. (2010). Migration as emancipation? The impact of internal and international migration on the position of women left behind in rural Morocco. *Oxford development studies*, 38(1), 43-62.

Saving is the fundamental economic activity that can lower the financial risk of migrant families, including retirement, children's education, the marriage of their daughters, house renovation, and covering unforeseen income losses. Women have the same proclivity as males to save but acquire smaller savings. Many of these women respondents living in the extended family system were recorded as not having their bank accounts and some were recorded as having been living in a nuclear family system. Either their husband gives them their back cards/bank book or they receive monthly remittances from another family member and that's only what is required to handle family expenses. Here, less financial skills or knowledge and a lack of personal bank accounts are a few barriers women face while making some savings. This is because women in these traditional patriarchal societies are perceived as caretakers rather than money handlers. Often women ask for extra money to spend on a health issue or to fulfil their children's requirements. On receiving, they make little savings from it or spend it on shopping. Parveen recalls – *“since he left me here with children. I am managing and looking after everything in his absence little I can save from expenses for myself; I should get something from what he earns after”*. It shows that women in the Siwan district often renegotiate their financial choices by taking on extra workload in the household.

Compared to women respondents from Malappuram districts who may join their husbands abroad easily. Often these women can save money to deal with various financial situations/choices or when their consumption increases. *“As a teacher in a government school, I have to look after so many things, including my children. I asked my husband to raise our monthly budget so that I might employ a housekeeper,”* Fathima Moidu explained.” Another respondent, Saneera, stated, *“Whatever extra I save, I take my kids to dine outside or go shopping”*. Rasha, another respondent, *“He has no idea how much I save in my personal bank account.” Whenever necessary, I spend on urgent requirements.”* These narratives demonstrate that women in Kerala place a higher value on personal financial savings, which are frequently spent on household consumption, their kids, or themselves.

Using the model provided by Rothschild, which supports the notion of women's economic independence, this study supports the proposition that women can achieve power in traditional societies where their status is low or dependent on men by engaging in productive activities, income-generating activities, or by making savings. Women's economic independence is a key factor in this context. Managing the remittances sent by husbands and the income wives generate or save helps women unwind the rigidities of traditional social roles and renegotiate their financial choices.

Migrations make them more Religious and less Traditional.

This section seeks to explore the interconnection between migration, cultural import, and left-behind women. Migration shapes the religio-cultural outlook of Muslim workers in the Gulf region, which is apparent from the practice of cultural import to their left-behind families. The new-found practices are seen as a corrective to the local and traditional practices that they have learned from their forefathers. The first-hand encounter with the religious observances in the Gulf region is authoritative and authentic and the practice of transfer is considered obligatory in the sense of religious duty. The bonds between migrants and non-migrating members are so strong and inescapable that migration profoundly alters²⁸ the lives of those who remain in their native countries. Besides financial resources to the left behind

family, the migrants transfer newly adopted beliefs, values, and practices²⁹ of the destination country known as social or cultural remittances.³⁰ Previous research has shown that migrants become religious soon after their arrival³¹ and use religious beliefs and practices as a mechanism to adjust³² themselves in the destination country. Additionally, they introduce their newly learned customs, practices, or values to the families they leave behind to dilute long-held traditions and encourage positive social transformation³³. In many cases, migrants living in Saudi Arabia frequently view themselves as active religious learners, whose duty and responsibility is to transfer the correct practice of Islam among family and community. Migrants transferring these correct religious practices evolved as a result of their increasing devotion to God (Allah) through their daily prayers, Quranic recitations, Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage, and their hope for living a decent life and a better afterlife³⁴ in the destination country. In this sense, migrants, and especially returnees, are viewed as agents that bring social or cultural change.³⁵

We observed several common practices that existed in both the districts such as visiting saint shrines (*mazaar*) -which is viewed as a deep violation of the core Islamic practice in the Gulf countries. Playing musical instruments or songs during festivals or marriages. Women wear traditional attires like *sarees* (more in the case of Siwan district which is dominated by the Hindu population). The daily practice of Muslims also contained activities that are believed as a part of Hindu culture – i.e., Muslim women wearing *saari*, *sindoor* (a bright red or orange dye traditionally worn in the hair by married women, and *bindi*). The non-migrating member's routine practice of establishing prayers, and adoption of *purdah* i.e., veil (use of head covers or abaya or full body cover) and separation of women and men.

The analysis reveals a strong correlation between longer migrants' stay and religious programming in the destination country and its influence on their left-behind families. When migrants remain religious in their destination country, they are more likely to influence their families to observe religious practices by telling

²⁸ Kibria, N., & Zakaria, S. M. (2022). Working for a Living in the Land of Allah. In *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam* (p. 208).

²⁹ Levitt, Peggy. (2001). *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Williams, N. E., Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. C. (2014). Migrant values and beliefs: How are they different and how do they change?. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 40(5), 796-813.

³⁰ Levitt, Peggy. (1998). Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. *International migration review* 32, no. 4: 926-948.

³¹ Herberg, W. (1960). *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay: American Religious Sociology* (Revised edition). Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

³² Herberg, W. (1960). *Protestant, Catholic*. P-12.; Hirschman, C. (2007). The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States. In A. Portes & J. DeWind (Eds.), *Rethinking Migration: New Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives* (pp. 391-416). New York: Center for Migration Studies and Berghahn Books.

³³ Yusupova, G., & Ponarin, E. (2018). Social remittances in religion: Muslim migrants in Russia and transformation of Islamic practices. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65(3), 188-200.

³⁴ Ai, Sugie. Ai, (2019). "Disembedding Islamic locale: The spread and deepening of Islamic knowledge in rural Bangladesh." *Journal of urban and regional studies on contemporary India* 5, no. 2: 1-21.

³⁵ Garapich, Micha³ P., et al. (2016). *Migrants as Agents of Change: Social Remittances in an Enlarged European Union. United Kingdom*, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

them to pray regularly and observe the norms and customs of the religion. Most non-migrant women acknowledged that at home and before going out, they have begun to wear the veil, which is also considered necessary in their religion, at the instructions of migrant members. *Ruby*, a mother of three daughters, middle school passed from *Siwan district*, and her husband works as a tailor in Saudi Arabia stated – *He works in the land of our beloved prophet and Allah*. Ruby also believes that her husband is more informed about Islam than men from her hometown who never made any journey to the Gulf – *“Umrah Karlebadan, namaz padhalan, humni ke bolelan namaz roza kareke. kamaake bhejelen, sahi baat bolelan to Humni ke bhi manike padela”* (He is a devout Muslim who has completed Umrah and who prays five times a day. Our regular prayers and fasts are encouraged by him constantly. He earns for us and teaches us the correct practice of religion, so I and my daughters follow what he says.) When these migrants return home, they frequently carry culturally significant items for their non-migrating members. One of the main reasons migrants prefer their female members of the family to wear a face veil, or full-body veil, is that it is a religious symbol, and another, is that through such persuasions these migrants reassert their masculinity. As *Abidah* from Malappuram explained, *her husband frequently brings abayas, prayer mats, and Qur’an for their kids and nieces and nephews. This is one way that we instill religious observance and practices in our young children and ourselves.*

The regular communication between emigrants and their family members is quite influential in this regard. They frequently introduce certain religious activities they participate in or listen to in their destination countries, e.g. their daily prayers, reading or listening to religious texts, women wearing a face veil (covering of head) or burqa (covering of full body and face with a cloth). Many of the women respondents confirmed that their migrant spouse regularly sends videos of religious lectures, religious texts, and Photos & videos of them visiting religious places like Mosques, *Makka & Madina* for pilgrimage. *Salma* from village *Pipra*, *Siwan* mentioned that *many women in our village wear the Hindu traditional ‘Sari’*. *My migrant husband began encouraging his mother to pray in ‘salwar-kameez’ a few years ago. After many years, she has begun to wear ‘salwar-kameez’ and pray regularly.* Similar narrations can be seen from *Shabira* from Malappuram, – *“My migrant father frequently brings niqab or abaya from Dubai. Since we were children, my sister and I have worn Abaya (long and loose cloth)”*.

Many cultural traditions are inextricably linked to religion, and many religious practices and behaviours have become so ingrained in people’s daily lives that it is difficult to distinguish between culture and religion. For example, both districts have a culture of visiting *Dargha Shareef* (Shrines) for *ziyarat*, as a religious visit or ‘pilgrimage’ (the majority of Sunni Muslims in India visit *Dargah* and believe Sufis are nearer to God). Many Muslim devotees visit *Beemapalli Dargah Shareef* in Kerala and *Dargah Hasan Peer Damaria*, *Khanqah Amjadia*, and a few more in the *Siwan district*. Believers from these districts keep paying such visits in the hope of receiving cures or the saint’s blessings. On the other hand, visiting such places is prohibited in *Wahhabi Islam*, a type of *Sunni Islam* adopted in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries since the founding of the new kingdom. When asked, women shared how their migrant husbands introduced correct religious practices. *Aliya and Ishrat*, whose husbands work in the same company in Saudi Arabia, reside in the same labour camp. They recall- that their husband frequently sent them religious videos via social media

applications such as WhatsApp or IMO. They remind them to pray on time and learn or recite the religious text every day. Similarly, *Ruksana Beevi* of Malappuram stated that her husband, who has been working in the Gulf for 14 years, has ceased attending or visiting shrines in their hometown and has urged her not to pay visits. It demonstrates the longer migrants stay and engage in destination culture, the more likely they are to influence their left-behind families with their newly adapted beliefs and values.

In doing so, as we investigated how and what religious practices migrants introduce to their families while living in the Gulf countries, we came across the pattern that these non-migrating women utilize these values and practices as mechanisms for enhancing their autonomy and mobility. The extended absence of a husband or other male members, particularly in the context of Siwan where low-skilled workers (blue-collar) often remain away from the household, creates a distinctive situation. In such cases, where women were traditionally required to be accompanied by a male member when going out, we found that women are frequently seen visiting places with another female companion. This companion could be their daughter, sister, mother, neighbor, or any female relative. The prolonged absence provides women with an opportunity to increase mobility with other women, ultimately reducing their dependence on men in a patriarchal society. This scenario contrasts with women in situations where husbands visit home more frequently, highlighting the impact of migration on women's autonomy and mobility in Siwan. *Fathima Begum*, a 49-year-old residing with her three children in Malappuram, mentioned that her husband who works as a project manager frequently visits Saudi Arabia, bringing various household items for the family. During his visits home, he often goes to the markets for purchases, and if necessary, she accompanies him. *Nasreen*, a 57-year-old and mother of four children (three daughters and a son) from Siwan, believes she has derived significant benefits from incorporating everyday religious practices, such as wearing a veil. Together with her daughters, she has regularized the practice of wearing a veil when going out to places deemed acceptable by her husband and extended family members. She shares that wearing the burqa has amplified her autonomy and mobility. Nasreen finds that going out veiled is more widely accepted, allowing her to expand her social circle, engage with other women, venture out with female members of the family or community, and participate in discussions on various social and religious issues. She discloses that this increased mobility has empowered her to influence her husband and in-laws regarding the education of her daughters, advocating for their attendance at modern schools. Beyond the positive impact on women's mobility and decision-making within the household, such actions contribute to the renegotiation of patriarchal norms in their daily lives. Moreover, it is conceivable that as women gain more mobility, a voice in household decision-making, and reduce dependency on men, a society gradually weakens its adherence to patriarchal norms.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to examine the impact of transnational male migration from Siwan and Malappuram on the left-behind women. This study examined causal mechanisms that have brought about a fundamental shift in gender roles in migrant households and a profound transformation in left-behind women regarding their perception, position, power, and status. This study further examined whether

educated wives enjoy more decision-making power and mobility outside the community than less educated wives, who have traditionally enjoyed fewer decision-making rights and mobility. The results of this study highlight two important factors that are directly related to the empowerment of left-behind women; one is the length of husbands' stay in the destination country, and the other is remittances both in terms of money and religio-cultural practices. They have tremendously altered the patriarchal structures and loosened social rigidities in migrant communities enabling women to increase bargaining power in and outside the household, perform the dual role of a man and a woman, and establish and expand social networks in the form of women groups or associations. The left-behind women use migration as a mechanism to increase their mobility by taking on added responsibilities previously performed by husbands like in the agriculture sector in deciding to hire labour or manage on her own, frequently visiting relatives, attending weddings, funerals, socio-religious ceremonies, and lending or borrowing money or starting a small business or taking up a job.

Migrants can be seen as change agents who transfer socio-cultural and religious remittances which have helped loosen cultural or traditional rigidities in the migrant communities. Migrants are inclined to import or share socio-cultural and religious knowledge, values, and beliefs with their families and communities. Left-behind women adopt these religious instructions like wearing of hijab outside the home and performing other religious activities including establishing regular prayers among other activities. By adhering to these practices women also gain certain liberties like going out to markets without a male member, which is otherwise a norm in traditional societies, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. It can further be argued that the educational level and skill level of both migrant and left-behind women do have a positive correlation with women's autonomy, mobility, and empowerment, as education is an indicator of empowerment. It is evident from this study that blue-collar migration has a more profound impact on gender relations when it comes to non-educated or semi-educated left-behind women.

In these women, migration and migrant husbands have taken off the wraps of patriarchal constraints, uncovering a transformative journey toward greater autonomy and empowerment, as they pass through new environments discovering self and constructing identities that transcend traditional gender roles.

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