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The Social Cost of Migration on Left Behind Husbands, Wives and Children in Bangladesh

Summary

A recent research of RMMRU concludes that economic gains of migration are enjoyed by the nation at large as well as by the migrant households as a unit. However, the social costs of migration are mostly borne by the individual household members- the left behind husbands, wives, children, elderly and siblings. So far, the government and civil society organisations including the NGOs have failed to incorporate the issue of left behind family members of migrants in the mainstream policy and programme activities. The social costs borne by individual groups vary significantly. Therefore, interventions to reduce the harmful social costs should be different for different groups. This policy brief is based on the research as well as deliberations of policy makers and experts during the dissemination workshop organized by RMMRU on 27 March 2019. The research has been mandated by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.



Introduction

This research attempts to understand the social costs and benefits of internal and international migration in Bangladesh. The majority of the researches on impact of labour migration treats household as the unit of analysis and concludes that households benefit economically and socially from migration of one or a few members. These studies demonstrate that migration reduces household poverty, increases income and expands the range of goods and services consumed by household members particularly in case of international migration. However, they mainly take economic costs of migration into consideration and overlook the social costs. This study particularly looks into social costs and benefits of migration. Instead of looking at household as a unit it attempts to explicate the social costs of migration borne by different groups of household members - left behind wives of male migrants, left behind husbands of female migrants and girl and boy children of both male and female migrants.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

This study is based on a conceptual understanding that social costs are integral part of migration experience. However, through meaningful policy intervention and social awareness the harmful social costs can be reduced. The aim of the research is to locate how the members of left behind families continuously negotiate with the negative social outcomes of migration and transform some of the challenges into opportunities by questioning the social order, by creating new norms and in the process, develop their own agency.

The research applied both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative research involved a household survey of internal, international and non-migrant families in 12 districts of Bangladesh. In 2014 and 2017, RMMRU has conducted two waves of a panel survey on 20 districts. This survey selected those households from the panel which have left behind male and female spouses of migrants and also those which have children of migrants below the age of 18 years. The survey altogether covers 1741 households. 279 of them are internal migrant households, 1061 international migrant households and 401 are non-migrant households. A total of 4884 members of these 1741

households have been interviewed. Among them, 135 are left behind husbands, 1094 are left behind wives, 286 are non-migrant husbands, 382 are non-migrant wives, 2216 are left behind children of migrant households and 771 are children of non-migrant households. Qualitative data includes 300 case studies of left behind male and female spouses and children.

Socio-demographic characteristics

The average family size of the migrant as well as non-migrant households is four. On an average these families have two children. The average age of the left behind and non-migrant husband is within the range of 40 to 45 years and left behind and non-migrant wife is within the range of 30 to 35 years. Major occupations of left behind husbands are agriculture, service, business, etc. 95 percent of the left behind wives are housewives. In both internal and international migrant households left behind wives and husbands receive significant amount of remittances. In majority cases, remittances constitute the sole source of family income in cash.

“RMMRU’s study has gone deep into digging the impact faced by left behind migrant children. The government is interested to understand the social cost borne by children of different gender and age groups. This issue should be incorporated in the Comprehensive Action Plan that the government is preparing on migration.”
Mr. Md. Shahriar Alam, MP, Hon’ble State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Left behind children

Insecurity, loneliness, missing one or both parents, absence of mother during sickness are some of the major difficulties faced by children of migrant workers. In the absence of the parent, children of migrants also shoulder additional responsibility for household management. The responsibilities borne by children of migrant workers are very much gendered, in nature. Participation of the girl child increases in activities such as cooking, cleaning and providing care to siblings. The boy child assumes additional responsibility in day-to-day shopping, payment of bills and supporting agricultural work.

There is a major concern about children of migrants missing out on their childhood and being burdened



with households chores in the absence of one of their parents. An interesting finding of the study is that somewhat similar percentages of children of non-migrant households are also involved in household chores. However, the time the latter group spends on household duties is less than children of migrants. Fifteen percent of the left behind children perceived that their education was hampered due to shouldering of additional responsibilities in the absence of the migrant parent.



Sons and a daughter of two female migrants staying with grandma

The school attendance outcome on children of internal and international migrants is also gendered. Compared to the children of male migrants, school attendance of children of female migrants is lower. Ninety-three percent children of male migrants are attending school regularly and eighty-six percent of the children of female migrants go to school regularly. This reflects the fact that in the absence of male migrants left behind wives make sure that children attend school.

“This study lays ground for UNICEF to look deeply at protection issues of left behind migrant children, both boys and girls. In the absence of one parent or in some cases both parents the migrant children are doubly vulnerable to social harms”.

*Ms. Irene Tumwabwe, Child Protection Specialist,
UNICEF*

Children of migrants also develop their agency while coping with the absence of their migrant parent through employing different methods. This includes taking part in games and sports, watching TV, using mobile phone, spending time with friends, spending more time with left behind parent

and talking with migrant parent in destination. Developing intimate friendship is another way of coping by the children of migrants. Compared to a girl child, a boy child use friendship more in adjusting with stresses and insecurities created by parental migration. Religious and cultural practices also create opportunities for them. Seventy-seven percent of the children of migrants are involved in different religious activities and festivals. This finding however should not be misconstrued as migration imposes conservative values. This is because equal percentage of children of non-migrant households also participate in religious activities. It is important to note that fifteen percent of the children have problem in coping with the absence of a parent. They seclude themselves and do not take any measure to overcome loneliness and sadness.

“The findings of this study are very important and some of them are actionable straight away.

Re-integration of the returnee migrant father or mother with their family is one such area. A son of a female migrant who has been cared by aunt calls the aunt- mother. Social intervention is required to help the mother to innovatively create her space in the heart of her son”.

*Mr. Christopher Morris, Country Representative,
Terre des hommes*

Left behind husbands

Loneliness, lack of companionship, burden of additional household responsibilities, psychological stress, disagreement with wife, fear about physical and sexual insecurity of wife in destination and inability to handle sickness of children are seen by left behind husbands as major social costs that they have to shoulder as consequence of migration of their wives. A majority of the left behind husbands have been managing their households on their own. Around one-fifth of the left behind husbands brought in external support to manage the households. Compared to an earlier study conducted in 2001, more left behind husbands have come out of traditional gendered division of labour and shouldered responsibilities such as medical care of children, elderly care and more importantly, one-fifth of them got themselves involved in cooking. The left behind husbands have mostly taken their daughters’ support in cleaning the

homestead and sons' support in day-to-day shopping and payment of bills. Around 70 percent of the left behind husbands do not mind doing these jobs; however, 30 percent of them have not been comfortable with performing those tasks they feel those are to be performed by women. Compared to the past, more and more migrant couples are engaged in joint decision making on matters pertaining to education and marriage of children and their future. In the absence of migrant wife, forty-one percent of the left behind husbands are taking decisions on their own about the use of remittances, in thirty-five percent cases decisions are jointly taken by the left behind husbands and their migrant wives. In nine percent cases migrant wives take decision on their own. In the rest fifteen percent cases decisions are taken by female migrants' parents, siblings and children.

One of the stresses that left behind husbands go through is societal scrutiny. Society looks down upon left behind husbands and do not treat them as 'man enough'. A section of the left behind husbands has developed their own mechanism in dealing with perception about them. They immerse themselves in work and spend more time with children. Some of them even work harder so that wife can return quickly. The research demonstrates that due to necessity some of the left behind husbands have redefined their masculine role by incorporating new forms of activities which were traditionally seen as feminine. Whether such changed perception of manhood will be sustained once the wife returns is not clear yet, the mental exercise that the left behind husbands go through creates agency within them in managing life in the absence of wife. Therefore it can be argued that migration exposes left behind husbands to a situation that generate certain transformation of values and redefines gendered division of labour.



"I no longer consider cooking only as women's job"

"I deeply appreciate the findings of RMMRU that societal lens of scrutiny which is of course gendered, increases the stress and insecurity of the left behind husbands as well as wives. The left behind husbands are perceived as 'not man enough' and left behind wives' as spender of husband's hard earned money and perhaps maintaining other relationships. To bring change in such mindsets government, civil society and NGOs have to work together in partnership".

Dr. Ahmed Munir Saleheen, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, GoB

Left behind wives

Earlier researches on left behind wives have demonstrated that decision making authority as well as autonomy of some of the left behind wives increased due to migration of husbands. But such increase of power is contingent upon age and education of the left behind wife as well as on the family structure. Some of them break certain traditional norms and some are successful in breaking the gendered division of labour at home as well as outside. However, such changes can be experienced in exchange of shouldering major increase in workload. This study also finds that women have successfully shouldered many of the new responsibilities which earlier have been performed by their husbands. Women hardly expressed discontent with such increased workload. On the contrary, they saw increased workload as an avenue for developing confidence. However, things have become more complex. Traditional control through extended family has reduced as more and more of the left behind migrant families have become nuclear in form. It seems in-laws are less powerful in the context of nuclear households but influence of husband through regular communication, particularly via cell phone and internet, has increased. This brings in both positive and negative outcomes for gender relationship.

Earlier studies show that in the absence of husband women who are relatively older, have a few children, and resides in a nuclear family setting, could participate effectively in public sphere of work and take independent decisions. A majority of the families under this research are living in a nuclear set up and women are performing all types



“Earlier studies show to ensure security many left behind families would merge with their extended families. This study shows a new trend of nuclearization of migrant households. On one hand nuclearization reduced scope of control of in-laws on left behind wives which increase their autonomy and independent decision making power, on the other hand new forms of insecurities have surfaced. Different sets of policy and actions are required to support these nuclear families”.

Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, University of Dhaka

of work such as taking family members to the doctors, paying bills, dealing with banks and maintaining family savings, looking after homestead construction etc. Earlier in a situation where maintaining day to day communication was hard there was little scope for the husbands to engage in day to day monitoring of the tasks that their wives were performing in their absence. Such situation provided the left behind wives a certain degree of autonomy in decision making. The advent of cell phones has altered scenario as migrant husbands are able to monitor the additional tasks that their wives perform in their absence. Women’s participation in agricultural production-related decision-making is a good example of such monitoring. The study finds a large number of families are not involved in agriculture. Only a handful of them are. In those families decisions such as purchase of type of seeds, irrigation, sale of produce are now instructed by migrant husbands to their left behind wives, in majority of the cases.

“This research brought an out of focus issue into focus. The study highlights the double standard of the Bangladeshi society where a left behind wife is praised for being able to act like ‘Dasha bhuja Ma Durga’ (Hindu goddess with ten arms) in the absence of her husband, at the same time questions her sexual integrity”.

Ms. Shameem Akhtar, Film Maker and Rights Activist.

In the absence of husband, some of the left behind wives come out of seclusion and become involved in social issues. Those include participation in extended family decisions regarding marriage and

other social events. Some left behind wives have taken part in mediation of marital conflict within the extended family as well as among neighbours. Due to the absence of their male counterpart, left behind wives have more opportunity to participate in these events. This, in the long-run, creates a new network to pursue other social goals. This is however not solely related to migration of the husband, it is also due to other broader social and economic processes that at work in Bangladesh that is changing the role of women in rural society from being restricted in private domain. The left behind wives who have some education are more capable to gain from such participation.

Left behind wives also bear some major social costs for their husbands’ migration. Loneliness, restrictions on movement, control by husband’s family, being overwhelmed with rearing of children, children’s education, physical and sexual insecurity, psychological stress, occasional nervous breakdown are important among them. The absence of husbands deprive them of the companionship. To them, spending days and months without their husbands is lonely and difficult. This sometimes takes women on the verge of mental breakdown. Another major challenge is the societal perception that they are spending husband’s money and perhaps pursuing relationships with other men. On many occasions, friends and relatives convey negative messages to the husband about their wives left behind. This creates distrust and distance between husband and wife. Left behind wives are worried that negative statements can lead to dissolution of their marriage.

It is interesting to observe how the discourse on left behind wives are determined by their sexual vulnerability whereas there is hardly any literature on migration which looks into sexual behaviour of husbands living in the countries of destination. This is also not an issue in respect to left behind husbands.

Specific Recommendations

Left behind children

- Community level awareness programme is required to make families conscious not to impose excessive household chores, including care work on children of migrants.
- In order to cope with the trauma of absence of a parent, counseling programmes need to be organised by the government agencies including those pertaining to women, children and youth affairs, and civil society organizations.
- Children of migrants should be included in programmes such as children's parliament. Clubs and libraries should be set up catering to the needs of children and those should be inclusive of children of migrants.

Left behind husbands

- Negative mindset of society about left behind husbands has to be replaced by underscoring their positive contribution in making their wives' migration effort successful.
- The contribution of left behind husbands in breaking the traditional gendered division of labour should be underscored in public discussions.

Left behind wives

- Societal suspicion of left behind wives pursuing other relationships has to be replaced by a deeper understanding of their contribution to children's education, caring the elderly and participation in male dominated spheres of work.
- After the return of their migrant husbands left behind wives should be encouraged to continue to perform some of the functions traditionally viewed as male work.

General Recommendations

- Currently government and development partners are involved in the preparation of a Comprehensive Action Plan on Migration. Needs and interests of left behind spouses and children should be well integrated in that document.
- Wage Earners' Welfare Board of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment needs to incorporate left behind husbands, wives and children as their important stakeholders.
- Support services to left behind families should be made integral part of "Wage Earners' Welfare Fund" programme.
- Accessing left behind family members of migrants become difficult due to lack of data. BMET can start developing a database of left behind families of migrant workers. This can be done at the time when BMET registers the migrants and provide them smart cards.
- At bilateral and multilateral forums, government and civil society should demand granting of annual leave to the migrants on a regular basis. This would reduce the problem of loneliness and isolation.
- The female domestic workers right to communicate with children should be ensured during bilateral negotiation with destination countries.

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