

Negotiated Identities: Re-examining Male Migration and “Left- Behind” Wives in India

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Introduction

A common feature of migration in India - international and internal- is that when men migrate they often leave their families- wife and children behind in the place of origin. What is the impact of such migration on wives who are “left- behind”¹? That is, is it a “bane” or a “boon” (Ullah 2017²)? Understandably, this is complex- while remittances benefit the family economically, splitting it up has potentially adverse consequences (Démurger 2015³). For example, absence of the spouse may mean that the wife has to shoulder without support from her husband the responsibilities of caring for children and other dependent members of the household. These additional responsibilities coupled with higher income on account of remittances may lead to the withdrawal of the “left- behind” wife from the labor market. At the same time, women may also need to fill in for their missing husbands in the family farm or business (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990⁴). Likewise, irregular remittances may force the “left- behind” wife to take up employment (Pais, Singh, Luis and Hossain⁵). Discharging the responsibilities of the absent migrant spouse can potentially empower the woman in a patriarchal society where the role of the wife is otherwise limited or restricted to the confines of the home. At the same time, there are potential psychological consequences too of disrupted family life.

Male Migration, Women’s Autonomy and Living Arrangements

In an earlier paper (Desai and Banerji 2008⁶) we looked at the impact of male migration on three aspects of empowerment of “left behind” wives- viz., their decision- making authority, autonomy with respect to physical mobility and labor force participation. The rationale stemmed from empirical evidence which highlights women’s limited mobility and decision- making power in India and other neighboring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Pakistan (Desai et al 2010⁷, Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta 2001⁸,

¹ The term “left- behind” is argued to have negative connotations. Ullah 2017 instead uses the term “remained- behind”.

² Ullah, A. (2017). “Male Migration and ‘Left-behind’ Women: Bane or Boon?” *Environment and Urbanization ASIA*, 8(1) 59–73.

³ Démurger, S. (2015). “Migration and families left behind” IZA World of Labor.

⁴ Mascarenhas-Keyes, S. 1990. "Migration, 'Progressive Motherhood' and Female Autonomy: Catholic Women in Goa." in *Structures and Strategies: Women, Work and Family*, edited by L. Dube and R. Palriwala. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

⁵ Paris, T., A. Singh, J. Luis, and M. Hossain. 2005. “Labour Outmigration, Livelihood of Rice Farming Households and Women Left Behind: A Case Study in Eastern Uttar Pradesh.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(25):2522-2529

⁶ Desai, S. and M. Banerji (2008). “Negotiated Identities: Male Migration and Left Behind Wives in India” *Journal of Population Research*, 25 (3): 337- 355.

⁷ Desai, S., A. Dubey, B. L. Joshi, M. Sen, A. Shariff, and R. Vanneman (2010). Gender and Family Dynamics (Chapter 10) in *Human Development in India: Challenges for a Society in Transition*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Bloom, S.S., Wypij, D., & Das Gupta, M. (2001). Dimensions of women’s autonomy and the influence on maternal health care utilization in a north Indian city. *Demography*, 38(1), 67–78.

Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001⁹, Desai 1994¹⁰, Balk 1992¹¹). Women's limited participation in the labor market in India has similarly intrigued researchers in recent years (Moore, Fletcher and Pande 2018¹², Klasen and Pieters 2015¹³).

It was our hypothesis that in their husband's absence women are likely to enjoy greater autonomy and decision-making power as they take on the role of their migrant spouses. Such women are more likely to be in the labor market than those without migrant spouses. Results indicated that wives' living arrangement is a major mediating factor in the extent to which they have autonomy when their husbands migrate for work. As compared to women living in extended families in the absence of their (migrant) husbands, those living on their own have more autonomy.

However, since we were using *only* IHDS- Wave I data, we could not disentangle the confounding effects of autonomy and living arrangements. For example, women who are autonomous are more likely to encourage their husbands to migrate and men with wives who have greater capacity to deal with the external worlds may be more comfortable leaving them in charge of the family while they migrate to work. Likewise, such women are also more likely to live on their own rather than with extended families. In the proposed paper by combining the two waves of IHDS, we hope to tease out the relationship between (1) women's autonomy and male migration and (2) autonomy and living arrangements among wives with migrant husbands. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Autonomous women are more likely to have migrant husbands.

H2: Among those with migrant husbands, women living independently have higher levels of autonomy than those who are not.

Our analytical sample (see Fig. 1) is currently married women in the age group 15- 49 living with their spouse at IHDS- Wave I (20, 905). At time of IHDS- Wave II (2012), they split into two categories- those with migrant spouses (750) and those with resident or non- migrant spouses (20,155). We propose to model the outcome of whether married women residing with their husband in IHDS- Wave I have migrant husband in IHDS- Wave II. Since the outcome variable is dichotomous (0/1) variable, we use logistic regression. The key variable of interest is women's autonomy as measured at the time of IHDS- Wave I (see Table 1).

The second step is to consider women who have only migrant spouses and model their living arrangements at the time of IHDS- Wave II- viz. whether they are living independently (242) or with an extended family in the absence of their migrant husbands (508). We use logistic regression here too.

Because we have three different measures of autonomy- viz. decision-making, mobility and participation in the labor market, we will have three sets of logistic regression corresponding to the two outcome variables.

⁹ Jejeebhoy, S. and Z. Sathar (2001). "Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region" *Population and Development Review* 27(4): 687-712.

¹⁰ Desai, S. (1994). *Gender Inequality and Demographic Behavior: India*. New York, The Population Council.

¹¹ Balk, D. (1994). "Individual and Community Aspects of Women's Status and Fertility in Rural Bangladesh" *Population Studies* 48(1): 21-45.

¹² Moore, C., Fletcher, E. K., and Pande, R. (2018). Women and Work in India: Descriptive Evidence and a Review of Potential Policies. Paper presented at the India Policy Forum, New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research.

¹³ Klasen, S. and J. Pieters, J. (2015). What Explains the Stagnation of Female Labor Force Participation in Urban India?" *The World Bank Economic Review*, 29(3), 449-478.

Figure 1: Schematic representation of male migration and wife’s living arrangements

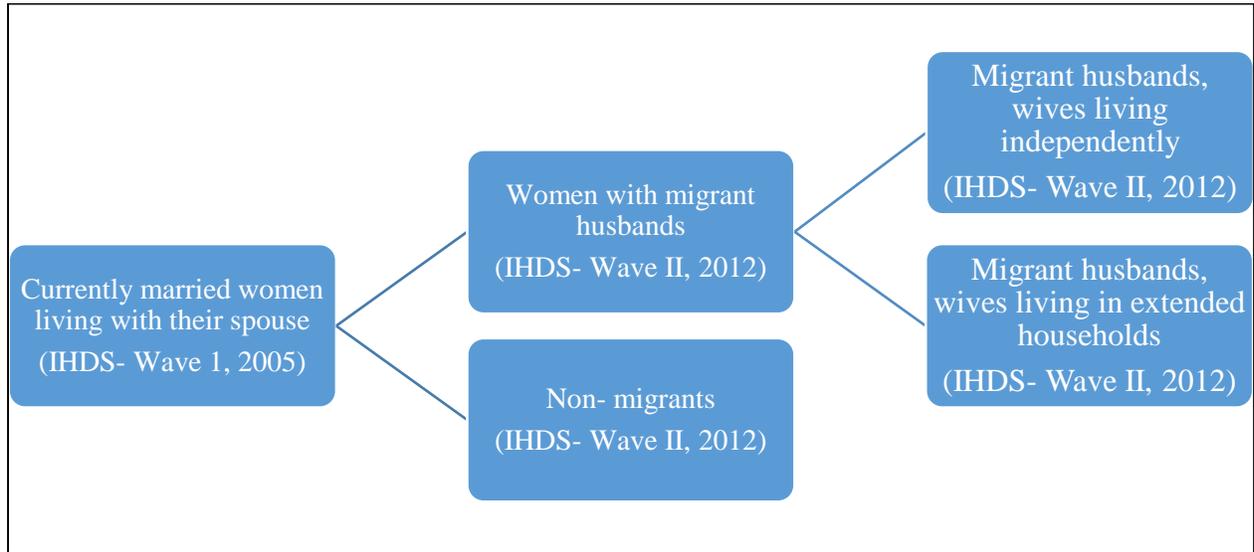


Table 1: Proposed analysis plan

Sample	Outcome variable	Multivariate modelling
Currently married women living with their spouse in IHDS- Wave I	Whether the husband migrates at time of IHDS- Wave II	Logistic regression- Women’s autonomy (key independent variable) + Other control variable
Currently married women with migrant spouses at IHDS- Wave II	Whether the woman is living on her own or with an extended family in the absence of her migrant husband	

Data Sources

As indicated in the previous section, we will use *two* data sources: IHDS- Wave I and IHDS Wave II. IHDS- Wave I and Wave II provide a wide gamut of nationally representative data on socio-economic and cultural practices in India. We seek to use the panel component of these two datasets for our analysis. These datasets are in the public domain and more information on them is available at ihds.umd.edu.

Measuring women’s autonomy

We focus on three aspects of women’s empowerment- viz. mobility, decision- making authority and labor market participation. The specific question in the IHDS survey that we use to measure decision-making ability is the following:

“Please tell me who in your family decides the following things?: what to cook on a daily basis, whether to buy an expensive item such as TV or fridge, how many children you have, what to do if a child falls sick and finally, whom your children should marry”

Likewise, women's physical mobility is captured through a series of questions that asked whether they had to seek the permission of their husbands or other senior male members of the family to go to the grocery store, health clinic and visit family or friends. Based on surveyed women's responses to these questions, we construct a decision-making and a mobility index. Higher the score on the index, greater is the autonomy and thereby, the greater likelihood of having a migrant husband and living on one's own.

Women's participation in the labor market is captured comprehensively in the IHDS through a series of questions on their participation in the family farm including livestock care, family business and for wage and salary payment. As indicated, women in the labor force are more likely to have migrant husbands than those who are not and more likely to live independently.