

# Examining the Effects of Reverse Migration on Rural Women

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## Abstract

Migration not only affects the physical count of the population of an area but also the composition and distribution across the area. Migration can be responsible for changing the economic and socio-cultural setting of the population of a place. It is a widely accepted view that the COVID pandemic had been responsible for one of the most recent changes in the population dynamics of the world. In India the exodus of migrant labour from cities to villages, reverse migration had successfully challenged and changed the previous status quo of population distribution. Reverse migration has not only led to changes in numbers of males and females within the villages of India. But there are deep seated economic and socio-cultural implications of the change in population dynamics. Most studies dealing with reverse migration, pandemic and population dynamics remain confined to the implications and difficulties faced by the migrant labour themselves. Taking all this into consideration this paper would try to analyse the implications of the reverse migration on the women who did not migrate to the cities, instead stayed back. It would explore the connections between reverse migration of especially males, its economic, socio-cultural effects on rural women and their vulnerabilities who in turn form a crucial part of rural development. This study would primarily use literature review to elucidate its points.

**Keywords:** Rural women, Migration, Reverse Migration, Pandemic, Population

“No one knows about me” - Anita Kumari (Jain, 2020)

The above words are spoken by Anita Kumari of Samastipur, Bihar; she is one among the many ‘Left Behind’ women of India. She is the wife of the migrant labourer who had migrated from Samastipur in search of work. Her words convey that her story and agency is not known, she resides in the background like many others. But before unpacking the phrase ‘Left Behind’, one must understand the origin of the word and delve into its deep seated connection with migration. In this paper I would not deal with definitions or effects of migration or reverse migration on the migrant labourers themselves instead try and analyse the effects of reverse migration on the women who had stayed back, the women of rural India who were left behind while their husbands migrated for work. This paper is primarily a qualitative study and would use a sociological lens. It uses secondary sources of data and extensive literature review to elucidate my observations and interpretations.

Migration in its most elemental terms is movement of people from one place to another. Migration can be voluntary or involuntary and there can be several push and pull factors that can be associated with migration. But for this particular paper instead of looking at migration of people as a whole, I would limit the boundaries within India and focus on labour migration. In India according to the data released

by Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21, total migration rate of labourers was 28.9 percent and among them 26.5 percent were from rural areas.

S. Irudaya Rajan, professor of migration and demography, at the Centre for Development Studies says “One male migrant supports at least four family members in his rural home,”. (Mahima, 2020)

Men from less developed states of India like Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, etc mainly from rural areas migrate to urban areas of other states or rural areas of other states in search of better opportunities. Many of them own small plots of agricultural lands at their own village home but the income from that is not enough, therefore in order to supplement, they migrate to find alternative options. They work in the construction and infrastructure sector, brick kilns or work as head loaders, rickshaw pullers, vendors, drivers and so on. Some of them also work as agricultural labourers and work in the farms of the North-western states of India like Punjab, Haryana, etc. Most of them spend four to five months in their state of employment then return home for two months mainly in times of festivities like Durga Puja, Diwali etc and then again go back. Most of these cannot bear the cost of keeping their families along with them, so they leave their family behind. And these people from the huge segment of Migrant Labour in India.

Field realities indicate that Uttar Pradesh and Bihar serve as the biggest source states of migrant labourers, followed closely by Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal and the major destination states are Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Another change in the recent migration pattern, especially in the last decade has been the interstate movement to new growth centres, especially in small and medium sized towns and million plus cities.

The population dynamics and the status quo of rural India had remained more or less stable till the year 2019. But with the entry of COVID 19 in March 2020, and the subsequent Lockdown has destabilised this status quo to a great extent. While India had maintained one of the strictest Lockdowns throughout the world, it had also seen the huge influx of migrant labour from mainly cities to villages, a trend of reverse migration.

Instead of discussing the plight of the migrant labourers who were the victims and participants of reverse migration, this paper would focus on the wives of the migrant labourers who were living the village homes, when their husbands, the migrant labourers, had went to the cities and other states to look for work, the women who were left behind. In the context of rural development, it is the plight and advantages of these women which makes them an effective component of rural development.

Hundreds of women like Anita Kumari, the quintessential ‘Left Behind’ woman. Just like Anita, many others are there whose husbands have left them behind in the villages while they have migrated for work. In the context of Literature, the phrase ‘Left Behind’ evokes an interpretation that these women were not considered participants in the decision making of their husband’s migration, instead they were merely informed and were left with no other choice but to remain in the village while their husbands migrated. This point can be further illustrated by Hondagneu-Sotelo’s work where the author mentioned that: “In all of the families in which men preceded their wives [to the United States], patriarchal forms of authority prevailed, so that migration decisions did not arise as part of a unified family or household strategy. Generally, husbands unilaterally decided to migrate with only token, superficial regard for their wives’ concerns and opinions. Women were not active decision-making participants”. (Das, n.d.)

These women remain in the homes of their husbands and stay with other family members while their husbands venture outside for other job opportunities. The women do not migrate for various reasons, one is lack of feminisation of the labour market, and there is a severe lack of job opportunities and safe

working environment for the women. Also in rural areas, the women fare lower than men in both education and capabilities so chances of finding suitable work depletes accordingly. According to Chabilal from the article ‘When Rural Jobs Disappear, Women Are The First To Lose Out’ by Tish Sanghera “They are more skilled and so more likely to get the job,” (Sanghera et al., 2019). And the rural environment is still entrenched in ideas of patriarchy that does not allow increased mobility to women. They are discouraged to venture outside by socio-cultural forces. Punctuating this factor is the data of 2011 Census which shows only 4.8 percent women migrated inter-state for work compared to men’s 50.2 percent and in intra-state only 2.1 percent compared to men’s 21 percent. (Sikdar & Mishra, 2020)

Wives of the migrant labourers who are left behind play a crucial role in running the household. They not only take the domestic responsibilities that include child rearing, cooking, wood collection, tending to animals but many of them also work in the farms and participate in other activities if the chance arises. Many women work as landless agricultural labourers in others’ fields. They also tend to other people’s cattle like cows, goats, sheep, chicken, etc for extra income. Their responsibilities include feeding, cleaning, breeding, and caring of new-born animals. They also pluck vegetables for others in exchange for material goods or cash. In absence of their husbands, they take their children to school, hospitals and other places. In Bihar, the women sell fish in the market; they work through blazing sun and lashing rain in very unhygienic conditions. Many of them also work in the Bidi factory, they roll the Bidis.

With the migration of men, on one hand, there is an increase of responsibilities on the part of the women, not only household work but also outside works like tending to farm, paying electricity bills and other works have to be done by women. The women have to take up the burden of household responsibilities as well the responsibilities of her husband, but on the other hand, working outside gives women a sense of freedom. It not only increases their mobility, but their extra income also provides them with a sense of autonomy. In absence of other male family members, these women act as de facto head of the household. And have the autonomy to take day to day decisions regarding household matters. It increases her influence in the home front.

But this kind of setting is fraught with other problems, the woman becomes de facto head, she is not the de jure head. She becomes not the permanent or actual head but only a circumstantial one; she is head when her husband is not around. While she has the autonomy to take day to day decisions, all the major decisions such as marriage, land sale or purchase are taken by her husband. As propounded by Birendra Das migrant labourer of Rampur Jalalpur village “I migrate, I earn and my wife is the head of the household? She might take non-significant decisions regarding day-to-day lives. But the final decision on serious and major issues will be mine. No matter if I am here at home or I am in Delhi or elsewhere.” (Das, n.d.)

Many women remain in a joint family setting where their life is monitored by their in-laws and many times they have to depend on extended male members for major life decisions. The extra money earned by women goes into the family fund and accounted for, they do have the freedom to use it for their own purpose. Another problem that occurs is that, absence of a husband equates into lack of security, the women are vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and untoward sexual advances at the hands of in-laws and other family members. Also there is the psychological impact, many newly women get separated from their husband almost immediately after marriage and are forced to live with complete strangers all alone. There is a huge amount of anxiety and insecurity attached to it. “The social cost of

male-dominated migration is really high. It has a psychological impact,” said Tumbe, author of India Moving. (Mahima, 2020)

Being a migrant labour’s wife, staying back in the village without a husband, a left behind woman has its own experiences and consequences. It had impacted the population dynamics of the village in a way that major occupations like agriculture in rural India were being dominated by women. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2019-20) more than three-quarters (75.7%) of women in rural India are engaged in agriculture. But with reverse migration, the situation changed. The status quo got disrupted, population dynamics changed as men were returning from cities to villages not for a vacation but for long periods of time with no certain plans of moving back.

The first and foremost effect on the women who had stayed back in the village due to reverse migration was the loss of income. The main breadwinner of the family had lost their income, the male migrant labour. So now instead of supporting the remittances received by the women from their husbands, the alternative income in the village which acted as extra income became the main income. In most rural areas women earn less than the men in terms of salary against farm labour, for example in Devlaha village of Ayodhya, according to Kranti Azad, a woman gets Rs 100 whereas a man would get Rs 250 for the same agricultural labour. But with the situation of COVID19, now Kranti gets Rs 50, income reduced to half. (Raman et al., 2021) There is a similar situation in most of the villages of rural India. Therefore poverty within the villages increased, as women now had even less money to run the household.

Many women, who were previously employed in the fields of others as landless and managed to gain some extra money, lost their chance because all those jobs were taken up by their husbands. Also many women who were the breadwinner of the families and worked in the fields for their main income lost their jobs to the returned males. Employers preferred able bodied males as labourers in farms instead of females, especially in a time of crisis like COVID19 when one could only hire limited people. This holds true for not only agricultural jobs but other jobs too such as working as masons, fishing, etc. Kranti Azad, farmer of Devlaha village in Ayodhya, a participant in the report made by IndiaSpend said "Last year, when the lockdown was announced, men who were working in the cities returned home and they took up the farm work that we did,". (Raman et al., 2021) Women were getting discriminated against due to their gender and the gender gap in the work sector was increasing along with loss on the economic front.

On the economic front, another problem that women faced was the loss of access to credit and market. The women who had taken loans from banks and even from money lenders in the informal sector in exchange for gold or other small assets were unable to pay the interest due to loss of jobs. Also many women who previously had access to credit from participation in Self-Help-Groups were unable to get new loans, as the main money source of SHG has decreased with the economy of the village itself. Consequently they could not hire, transport and sell materials in the market which further exacerbated poverty.

On the social front, since the returned men took up the jobs in the villages, the women lost their network. They could not go to the jobs themselves, and therefore connections to middlemen, other women workers got lost. Also many women became more susceptible to caste discrimination and exploitation by people of higher castes. Most of the women who opt for manual labour mostly belong from the lower castes, and they work in the fields and other holdings of high caste men. Since most of the land holdings in villages belong to high caste men, who were wealthy compared to other lower castes, the females

belonging to higher castes need not do physical labour outside homes. Also according to Hindu caste traditions, it was considered unacceptable and disgraceful that the women of the household come outside the confines of the domestic front and work outside. And since the supply of women's labour is more than demand, many men choose women on the basis of their caste and physical appearance.

Caste discrimination had another consequence during the lockdown period. The migrant labourers who were returning due to reverse migration had to go through COVID protocol as per Government rules before entering the village premise. But many of the migrant labourers who belonged mainly from lower castes faced discrimination and even hostility from upper castes who deemed them as infectious (covid affected) by virtue of them being returnees. Many of them were forced to isolate themselves along with their families. In many cases the upper castes not only discriminated against them but their families too. So it became very difficult for the women of the household to procure groceries or other items in absence of cooperation from other villagers. In other cases many women could not meet their husband even after returning to the village due to caste based discrimination combined with misinformation related to COVID 19.

On the domestic front, women were facing issues with mobility and familial restrictions. With the return of their husband, the jobs which were outside and gave women some mobility became part husband's role and thus women were forced to confine themselves within four walls. As the idea of patriarchy dictates, the sexuality and mobility of women must be curbed and this can be done by confining their role within domestic work and limiting their area of accessibility in the outside world. Sanskritisation has enabled popularisation of brahmanical traditions which propagates immobility and limiting of women's agency within the domestic sphere.

The women, the de facto head of household had to forfeit their powers to the de jure head, a.k.a their husband. Women lost their decision making powers within the household. As studies suggest, most male migrant labourers are not comfortable with the idea of their wife becoming the household head and they consider themselves to be the head and not their wife. They further argue, since the primary income is done by them, they would have most decision making powers and their wives work and opinion is supplementary. The little control they had over land was also lost. It is a known fact while land ownership is mostly under the male members of the household, but in absence of the males it was the women who did most of the agricultural work but now their husbands replaced them. As Nitya Rao, author of "Good Women Do Not Inherit Land" suggests "Women are doing the bulk of the agricultural work, but they don't have control over their labour, income or assets." (Mahima, 2020)

The number of hours of unpaid carework increased in manifold amounts. With husbands and even other male family members at home not only there are more mouths to feed but also hours spent at other chores like fetching of water, washing of clothes, collection of fuelwood, cooking increased drastically. For many women additional responsibilities came with children residing at home, as schools remained closed during lockdown. And with an increasing number of family members, the amount of food and water increased thus women had to spend more hours in the kitchen and also on chores of fetching water and fuelwood.

The incidences of domestic violence and other forms of abuse increased on the women. According to the National Commission for Women (NCW), there were 5,297 domestic violence cases in 2020, compared with 2,960 in 2019. National Legal Services Authority report indicates most domestic violence cases during lockdown were from the states of Uttarakhand and Haryana. (Maji, Bansod, & Singh, 2021) With lack of jobs, savings drying up came desperation, frustration and despair among the returned migrant



labourers. They wanted to earn more or return to the city but were not able to. Often this built up frustration manifested themselves in forms of increased substance abuse, alcoholism and domestic violence. Also women became more vulnerable to sexual abuse and untoward advances because all the male family members who previously were in the cities have returned and are staying with them.

From existing research on COVID 19 and domestic violence and other abuses, one can draw a positive correlation between alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Domestic violence and abuse on women has perpetuated with the opening of wine shops. And lack of jobs, restrictions on mobility, lack of valid forms of entertainment, rising frustration and social isolation has pushed many people towards alcoholism. Many had drowned their sorrows with alcohol. That had added to the sorrows of women, who have not only become prone to abuse but were also forced to see their limited family savings spent not on food but on alcohol. Many mothers could not feed their children; they could not procure due to lack of money and were forced to starve themselves and her children.

There was Government imposed spatial variation in lockdown restrictions based on the classification of all districts into red, orange, and green zones in April and May 2020. Districts marked as red zone saw the strictest lockdown measures, while orange and green zone districts had fewer restrictions. This classification was based on several factors including the number, and the doubling rate of Covid-19 cases. Out of 639 districts, 120 districts were classified into the red zone, 257 into the orange zone, and 262 into the green zone. (Ravindran & Shah, 2020) According to the data provided by the article, Unintended consequences of lockdowns, COVID-19 and the Shadow Pandemic in India, there has been a increase of cases of Domestic violence (135 percent) in the districts marked as Red zones during COVID 19 where the Lockdown was strictest compared to Green zones where Lockdown was most lenient. Also in terms of cyber crimes against women Red zones show 186 percent rise compared to Green zones. (Ravindran & Shah, 2023) Augmenting these findings is the article, Domestic violence during COVID-19 pandemic: The case for Indian women, that state most news articles about domestic violence were reported in newspapers in the months of April and May of 2020 when the Lockdown was most severe but number of reports showed a decline in the month of June. This may be interpreted as a direct consequence of the process of unlocking that had started in many parts of the country by June. The Hindu had reported on cases from mainly southern states of India like Tamil Nadu while newspapers like Dainik Jagran had reported on cases from northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. (Maji, Bansod, & Singh, 2021)

Symbolising a twist in this dreary tale, the return of migrants had some positive effects too on the women. Many male migrants became the sharer of responsibilities with the women. With women limiting themselves only to domestic work, the men were taking up outside work, which acted as a stress reducer for them. Also on a psychological front, for many women knowing their husband is there with them safe and sound is far better than the anxiety which would have entailed if the husband did decide to stay back instead of leaving for villages. Another point would be that with the return of the husbands within the household, many women got the security which they lacked when they were away.

In order to conclude we may say that a phenomenon of successful reverse migration of a migrant labourer to his village may serve as a picture of happy family reunion for him and his family especially his wife, if looked at a glance. With deeper probes one finds the entangled threads of multifaceted problems, where the women who are left behind are most adversely affected. But one must not get lost in all the negatives and ignore the fact that it is with the trend of reverse migration that the various

problems faced by rural women who stay behind gained the interest of researchers worldwide which otherwise remains shoved into the background.

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