

Chapter 10

Female Migration and Stay-Behind Children in Bangladesh



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10.1 Introduction

Labour migration has been a common livelihood strategy. Moreover, migration of women is not a new phenomenon, although it has recently begun to be more widely recognized as a result of the decentralization of industrialization from developed countries and the growing demand for low-paying workers from developing countries. Globally, the proportion of female migrants accounted for 48%, although there is considerable regional dissimilarity. The proportion of female migrants is higher in Europe (51.9%) and lower in Africa (41.6%) and in Asia (45.6%) (Le Goff, 2016). In the 1960s and 1970s, migration theories often assumed that migration is a male phenomenon and that women started migrating just to depend on their husbands and fathers abroad. Recently, ideas have shifted enormously in favour of female migrant workers (Carballo et al., 1998). Worldwide, the increase in female migration was only 0.2% in the 1960s, and after that, within four decades (1970 to 2010) the share increased by 2% (Sultana & Fatima, 2017).

The consequences of male and female migration remittances on the stayed behind family members may not be similar. Le Goff (2016) stated in his study that compared to men, women are more likely to stay connected with the family and try to remit more than their male counterparts. A study on the advancement of women, conducted by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute, shows that Bangladeshi female workers in the Middle Eastern countries remit on average 72% of their earnings to their home (INSTRAW and IOM, 2000). Kabeer (2007), in her study stated that Bangladeshi female workers working in Middle East countries remit on average 77% of their income. It is therefore clear that the saving and spending priorities of both male and female migrant households are distinctly

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different. This may be largely explained by the fact that women are more determined to devote themselves to their children than men.

There is an increasing focus on research related to the impacts of female migration on their left-behind¹ (*sic*) children and families (for example, Parrenas, 2005; Gamburd, 2005). Female's independent migration not only contributes profit to themselves but also to their family members who remain behind in the countries of origin (Drakakis-Smith, 1993). According to UNFPA (2006), remittances sent by female migrant workers are usually spent to satisfy hungry stomachs, clothing, health care, children's education (Yang, 2008), and a good job. Their remittances also play a crucial role for their children and also themselves, such as improving children's health, reducing infant mortality due to the ability to spend more on good food and medicine (McKenzie, 2006), child education and improving the standard of living of loved ones left at home (Ukwatta, 2010), and redeveloping the concept of gender role within and outside households (Sylvia et al., 2011).

On the contrary, some studies have shown that the absence of a mother has a more serious adverse effect on unaccompanied children's education (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2010; UNICEF, 2008), vaccination (McKenzie, 2006), behaviour and emotional wellbeing (Ukwatta, 2010; IOM, 2008). The study carried out by Pinto-Jayawardena (2006) added that long-term disconnection of women usually results in harmful consequences for families and children. The study conducted by Shen et al. (2009) revealed that small children who are left behind are also vulnerable to injury. In addition, maternal migration sometimes leads to the early marriage of young girls in the family (IOM, 2008).

This paper is a contribution to this literature. This study explores everyday family care issues with a particular focus on these unaccompanied children's education, health, and psychosocial well-being. Similarly, this study examines how the stay-behind family members assist in the upbringing of unaccompanied children in the absence of their mothers. Finally, the research discusses the long-distance mothering of female migrants and the implications of the mothers' absence on the children who stayed behind.

10.2 Methodology

The paper was based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data comprises published and unpublished materials collected from various organizations like the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research (RMMRU), Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) etc. Singair Upazila of Manikganj district was initially selected for primary data

¹A number of studies use the term Left behind 'for the stayers whose family members migrated leaving them alone at home. However, the term left-behind 'has a negative connotation that is, this sounds like they are abandoned. So, this study will use the term stay-behind for the non-migrating family members/children who are living in their home country.

collection due to its highest concentration of female migration (45%) compared to the national proportion of female migration (10%) in the last 15 years between 2004 and 2018 (author's compiled data collected from BMET office). Finally, two villages named Medulia and Jaagir from Singair Upazila were selected for the questionnaire survey. Fifty samples were selected for a detailed household survey. The caregivers of the migrants' children were chosen as respondents. Our sample is restricted to children whose mothers have been working abroad for at least 12 months. Since there was a lack of an appropriate database on female migrant workers in Bangladesh, the snowball technique was used for selecting the respondents.

10.3 Female Migrants: Socio-demographic Profiles

In Bangladesh, international migration officially started in 1976, but after 15 years, female migration showed a substantial existence in 1991 (Islam, 2015). Also, the number of female workers until 2002 did not give us any trend; rather, it fluctuated for more than a decade from 1991 to 2002 (BMET, 2021). In 2003, there was a slight increase in female migration due to the professional amendment specified by the government from only skilled workers to unskilled and semi-skilled with a minimum age of 35 years. The age limit for domestic and garments workers in 2006 was again reduced to 25 years from 35 years. In the case of female migrant workers, the occupational category was restricted during that time and, following the lifting of the veto, female migration from Bangladesh further increased (Sultana & Fatima, 2017). Official figures show that 902,481 Bangladeshi women travelled abroad in search of employment between 1991 and 2019 (BMET, 2021). However, this figure only describes officially recorded numbers, while the total number of undocumented Bangladeshi migrant women workers would be significantly higher (Siddiqui, 2003).

In the study, female migrant workers were massively concentrated in the age group of 31 to 40 years (about 60%) while 36% of migrants belonged to 21 to 30 years age group. Only 4% of migrant women belonged to the age group above 41 years. Regarding education, about 40% of female migrants had no formal schooling experience. Majority of them (56%) had experience of primary education. Only 2% passed secondary school and 2% had experience of higher secondary school respectively.

The study reveals that 52% of female migrants come from nuclear families and the percentage of extended and joint type families was about 48% (42% extended and approximately 6% joint family), which was higher than the national proportion. So, in the extended families, the presence of more members in female migrant households could indicate that other caregivers in the family matter for the female migration decision for households of this survey. Because in absence of mothers, it is sometimes difficult for fathers to take good care of their unaccompanied children. The survey result shows that, in female migrant households, the average family

member was 3.38 persons, whereas the ratio of male and female members was 56% and 44%, respectively. However, a large number of female members were found among children, who are between 0 and 18 years old, whereas the ratio of girls was 61% compared to 39% boys.

10.4 Wages and Remittances of Female Migrants

The study found that female migrants were really less-skilled and most of them worked as domestic workers (84%) and the rest were also low-end service providers like cleaner, cook, caregivers etc. That is why female migrant workers' income was also lower. The Bangladesh government fixed the minimum wage for domestic aid for female migrants at US\$ 150 per month. However, the respondents reported that 20% of female migrants earned less than US\$ 150 (equivalent) per month, about 27% of female workers earned between US\$ 151 and US\$ 250 (equivalent) and 44% earned between US\$ 251 and US\$ 350 (equivalent). About 9% of female migrants have been identified from a relatively larger income-earning group with an income of US\$ 351 and US\$ 600 (equivalent) per month.

Unlike males, in the case of females, the frequency and amount of money being sent are lower. Because usually, females get low wages than male migrants for their less-skilled work patterns. So, they try to gather their income for a couple of months and send money less frequently. Besides, it is difficult for them to go outside to send money, as they are always under the command of employers for the domestic responsibilities that are typically assigned to them. However, my study shows a different image of female migrants. More than half (52%) of the female migrants could send money every month. Almost 28% usually sent money once in 2 months, and the remaining 20% sent money less frequently, like every 2/3 times in a year. The existing studies also supported that women are more likely to stay connected with the family than men and try to remit more than their male counterparts (Le Goff, 2016). Another research done by IOM also claimed that though women usually earn less than men, they send a higher portion of their income (IOM, 2008). It is evident from another study that the proportion of sending wages is 0.69% more for female migrants compared to male migrants (Rahman, 2013).

The study found that more than 90% of women sent their money through formal channel, either the bank or bKash (money transfer app). This is because of getting profit for using official channels in money transfers from abroad. According to the Government of Bangladesh, banks are allowed to provide 2% cash incentive to beneficiaries directly in BDT for each transfer of remittances.

It is evident from the study that, on average, every month, 42% of female workers were able to send remittances between US\$ 151 and US\$ 300. Approximately 36% of female migrants sent between US\$ 50 and US\$ 150, 17% between US\$ 300 and US\$ 400 and 5% between US\$ 401 and US\$ 500 per month. Since, in most cases, female migrant workers were employed as housekeepers; they were given the opportunity to live in the homes they serve abroad. So, they do not have to spend

any extra money on their accommodation and maintenance, rather the employers bear the cost. They can therefore remit their entire earnings to their respective families.

The recipient of the remittance is a vital indicator for understanding the dependence of women in the country of origin. About half of the total remittances are collected by women worldwide (IOM, 2008). However, as a remittance sender, to whom do women migrants prefer to send money? In this study, the respondents reported that (46%) of women sent remittances to their husbands, and 54% did not send them because of their little faith on their husbands. Among this 54%, about 22% sent money to their mothers, 10% sent remittances to their father, another 10% sent to their sisters, 8% sent to their mature son/daughter and (4%) sent money to their father-in-law and brother. Women migrants clearly preferred to send money in a way and to someone who ensured that the money was spent for their children's wellbeing and household purpose.

There is another actor who is in charge of remittance or who decides how the money sent by migrants is spent. Study found that about 40% of migrants' husbands enjoyed the authority to use these remittances. Respondents reported that 24% of female migrants decided where to spend money by themselves, and in 16% of cases, remittances were spent by the joint decision of husbands and wives. Furthermore, about 16% of migrants' parents and 4% of migrants' brothers had the chance to control remittances.

Remittances sent by female migrant workers to their home are used for various purposes as mentioned in multiple responses by the respondents. For instance, food consumption (92%), better education for children (50%), treatment (42%), house construction or repairs (24%), repayment of debt (16%), purchase of land (4%), and other purposes such as assisting husbands in business, child marriage expenses etc. Existing studies have also supported that women are more likely to spend money on food, nutrition and education, while men prefer to spend money on business or profitable sectors (Sylvia et al., 2011).

10.5 Caregiving to Unaccompanied Children

Why women migrants left their children at home can be explained by two theoretical factors: macro-system factors and micro-system factors (Tong et al., 2019). Macro system discusses the broader reason such as work contracts, conditions and laws between the country of origin and destination, visa restrictions, etc., that do not allow mothers to bring their children with them and assign their husbands and children to stay home (Rashid, 2016). The microsystem discusses the family nature of migrants, their socio-economic status, the travel and living cost of children, the age of children, etc., which often decide the choice for leaving children at home. However, the ecological theory argues that children do not grow up in isolation; rather they develop themselves within an affiliation arrangement consisting of the family and the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

When a mother decides to travel abroad, she first thinks about her children's safety and care. She tries to keep them in a safe place with a reliable family member, either her in-law's side or parents' side. The study found that 48% of migrants kept their children with children's grandmother (mother's side), thinking that the place would be more secure for their children and the children will be happy to live there and obtain extra care. Women who were aware of their husband's behavior that they were engaged in drugs and alcohol did not keep the children with their husbands. Only 20% of women migrants transferred the childcare responsibilities to their husbands. Another 16% of migrants kept their children in charge of their grandmother (father's side). Also, those who had no opportunity to keep children with their in-laws because of their illness or age kept their children with their sisters (12%), the child's aunt. In a few cases (4%), the grandfather kept their grandchild in the absence of their mothers.

The study shows that most of the caregivers kept the stay-behind children in their initial living place. However, the children were later moved to caregivers' living place after migration of their mother. Moreover, the remaining 8% of caregivers moved to the children's living place to take care of them. In particular, migrants' sisters who are unmarried and young, moved to migrants' houses to care for their children.

Considering the bonding between children and caregivers, 44% of respondents reported that stay-behind children had a very good relationship with their caregivers and the caregivers provided significant emotional care to the children. The stay-behind children also liked to exchange thoughts and feelings with their caregivers. In particular, stay-behind children had good relations with their grandmothers and aunts. Because, they were able to express their wishes and demands to their grandmothers or aunts. The respondents also mentioned that the reason for building good relationships with grandmothers was that grandmothers could tell them bedtime stories. Unfortunately, because of workload, children's father could not give quality time to them, and sometimes they also ignored the children's responsibility, thinking that childcare duty is a mother's task.

10.6 Educational Attainment of Unaccompanied Children

Remittances sent by mothers are good support for better education for children, especially for their better schooling, good tutoring, adequate learning materials, etc. In this study, regarding gender distribution of the school-going children, 63% were girls and 37% were boys. The study found that the percentage of primary level students was 53%, secondary level students 42% and graduate level students were only 5%.

Types of school was categorized into government and private here. The study found that 54% of female migrants' children were enrolled in government schools and 46% in private schools. This is also interesting to mention that to respondents, private school means better school where educational output and education care are

better than government schools. Respondents reported that private school is costly, and only those who can afford the cost can study there. Caregivers of children mentioned that due to the availability of remittances, the educational outcome of children was better. Because, 78% of children got better schooling, approximately 69% had a private tutor and 72% had adequate learning materials (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Caregiver opinions about a different section of education of migrant's children

| Impact on education | per cent |
|---|----------|
| Sex of children who are currently enrolled in education | |
| Male | 37 |
| Female | 63 |
| Current ongoing education level of female migrants' children | |
| Primary | 53 |
| Secondary | 42 |
| Graduate | 5 |
| Types of an educational institution | |
| Government | 54 |
| Non-government | 46 |
| Accessibility of better schooling among migrants' children | |
| Yes | 78 |
| No | 22 |
| Facility of private tutor among migrant's children | |
| Yes | 69 |
| No | 31 |
| Accessibility of adequate learning materials among migrants' children | |
| Yes | 72 |
| No | 28 |
| Attendance of school/college among migrants' children | |
| Regular | 87 |
| Irregular | 13 |
| Passing status of all subject in class examination | |
| Yes | 84 |
| No | 16 |
| Causes behind failure among the children of migrant (multiple answers) | |
| More day absence | 70 |
| No one helps them | 58 |
| Has household task | 20 |
| Status of dropout cases among the children of migrant | |
| Yes | 9 |
| No | 91 |
| Causes behind dropout among the children of migrants (multiple answers) | |
| Work at home | 49 |
| Work outside home | 48 |
| Due to illness | 12 |
| Not interested in education | 4 |

Among school-going children, the school attendance rate was regular among 87% children and irregular among 13% children. The main reported reason for irregular attendance was that no one enforced the children for their study. About 84% of migrants' children recorded pass in class examination, while 16% of them could not pass all subjects in class examination. For those children who could not pass all subjects, 70% of them were irregular in class, approximately 58% did not receive any help from family members regarding their homework given by the school teachers, and 20% were engaged in household chores which prevented them from going to school and studying regularly. The study also reveals that the dropout rate of female migrants' children were 9% and the leading causes reported by the respondents were household work (49%), burden of outside work (48%), illness (12%), lack of interest in study (4%) (Table 10.1).

10.7 Healthcare of Unaccompanied Children

Accessibility of remittances helps the children to get proper food, nutrition and healthcare. According to caregivers, the food intake status of stay-behind children improved after migration of the mother. They mentioned that the children are taking balance diet including fish or meat, eggs, milk, vegetables, fruit, sugar, etc. for daily meals after migration of their mother compared to the previous times. Caregivers of children reported that the food intake status of children improved for 48% of children, food intake remained same among 44% of children and worsened among 8% of children. The leading causes for worsened food intake status after mother's migration was that 62% of children did not maintain mealtime, 20% did not maintain a balanced diet, 32% took less food and 52% took junk food (Table 10.2). It was also found from the caregivers' answers that total 58% of migrant families spent more money for the food intake of stay-behind children after their mother's migration.

The caregivers reported the frequency of illness among the stay-behind children that 11% of children got sick more often, 58% got sick sometimes and 31% hardly got sick. For the treatment of children, the caregivers reported that approximately 45% visited local doctors, 24% visited government doctors, 20% visited private clinics and, 11% visited a specialist (Table 10.2). They preferred going to the local doctors more because they are familiar with the local doctors, who are usually from the same locality. The local doctors here are those who are not formally certified. Regarding government hospitals, the respondents said the treatment cost is low there, however, there is a long queue for visiting a doctor. The caregivers also mentioned that the doctors were usually selected according to the diseases. They visited local or government doctors for cold, cough, fever, stomachache, and headache. However, for complex diseases they visited to a private clinic or paediatricians. In this case, they need to go to the city to get a specialist doctor since the paediatricians are hardly available in the rural area.

Table 10.2 Caregiver perceptions regarding impact on health of migrant's children

| Impact on health | Per cent |
|---|----------|
| Caregiver perceptions of food intake status of stay-behind children after migration of mother | |
| Improved | 48 |
| Same | 44 |
| Worsened | 8 |
| Reason for worsened food intake status due to the absence of mother (multiple answer) | |
| Do not maintain food time | 62 |
| Do not take balanced diet | 20 |
| Take less food | 32 |
| Take junk food | 52 |
| Have extra budget on children's food after their mother's migration | |
| Yes | 58 |
| No | 42 |
| Incidence of illness among children | |
| More often | 11 |
| Sometimes | 58 |
| Hardly | 31 |
| Sources of treatment for migrants' children | |
| Govt. Hospital | 24 |
| Local doctor | 45 |
| Private clinic | 20 |
| Specialist | 11 |
| Accessibility of health care for children to caregivers in absence of mothers | |
| Difficult | 16 |
| Not difficult | 84 |

In my survey, the caregivers were asked whether they experienced difficulties in caring for the health of stay-behind children due to the absence of their mothers. About 84% of caregivers reported that it was rather easy to access health care facilities because as of now medical services are available everywhere and the migrant mother regularly sends remittances. However, 16% of caregivers reported difficulty in providing medical service due to the mother's absence since, the other household members were too busy with other tasks.

10.8 Psychosocial Impact on Unaccompanied Children

Though it is acknowledged that the reason for women migration is for the betterment of the family; however, due to the foremost male-controlled social norms, society does not accept this positively. About 68% of the respondents acknowledged that society takes female migration negatively. According to the community, after going abroad the women engage in criminal activities and do not communicate with

their stay-behind family. The remaining 32% acknowledged that the society takes female migration positively or as a normal thing. Because female migration is a source of income for the family and it is also empowered women (Table 10.3). Besides, migrant women can improve their lifestyle which ultimately improves their social status. They can also help other family members.

Not only the society but the family member and even the children also do not accept their mothers' migration positively and are unhappy with it. Caregivers can understand the children's view about their mother's absence as they are attached to them. Approximately 40% of respondents reported a negative relationship between mother and children due to migration, because the children desire to live together as a full family. They miss their mother and did not take it lightly that their mother had to go abroad leaving them behind. The caregivers reported that the stay-behind children also felt that after going abroad, their mother rarely communicates with them and hardly sends money for their upkeep. However, as reported by caregivers, 60% of children took their mother's migration positively and were happy to have a migrant mother. They were in constant communication with their mother (Table 10.3), usually through video and audio calls daily or once in 2/3 days, which reduced the distance between mother and children. The children received financial support from their migrant mother. They were able to buy new clothes regularly and buy food according to their desires. Migrant mothers sometimes send gifts to their children like clothes, mobile, cosmetics etc. Thus, many of the mothers are not restrained but keep taking care of their children from abroad. So, the children can appreciate their mother's sacrifice for the well-being of their family. Mother's migration also indicates a chance for mature children to migrate abroad.

The mother is the primary caregiver for her children and she knows each response or reaction of her children's activities closely. The absence of a woman in the household commonly leads to changes in traditional gender roles. Often, the burden of

Table 10.3 Caregiver perceptions regarding psychosocial impact of mother's migration on their children

| | Per cent |
|---|----------|
| Psychosocial impact of mother's migration | |
| Social perception about female migration | |
| Positive | 32 |
| Negative | 68 |
| Perception of mother's migration to children | |
| Positively | 60 |
| Negatively | 40 |
| Psychosocial impact of the absence of mother on the children (multiple answers) | |
| Sadness | 60 |
| Depression | 44 |
| Loss of interest in normal enjoyment activities | 22 |
| Addicted | 14 |
| Aggressive | 12 |
| Insecurity (abuse, bullying, beating, sexual harassment) | 6 |
| Low self-esteem | 2 |

family care falls on other female household members who might be too old to care for others or too young to assume the responsibilities of an adult. In such a situation, the impact of a woman's migration on her family is not optimistic due to the stereotypical gender role allocations in the household. On the other hand, children also do not feel secure and happy, they become annoyed and exhibit irrational behaviours, sometimes they get involved in crimes. Table 10.3 shows that the absence of mother might make the children sad (60%), feel depressed (44%), lose interest in regular activities (22%), become addicted (14%), become aggressive (12%), expose the children to insecurity like abuse, bullying, beating, sexual harassment (6%), and low self-esteem (2%). The caregivers reported that being deprived of family care and lack of proper supervision often make children get involved in such activities.

10.9 Conclusion

The study attempted to identify the female labour migration and its impact on their stay-behind children in Manikganj district of Bangladesh. Conceptually, the study describes the socio-demographic profile of migrants and their families, utilization of remittances and causal effects of mothers' migration on three different dimensions (education, health, and psychological well-being) of their children who remained home in Bangladesh. The volume and uses of the remittances sent by female workers showed a very positive approach to the family's well-being. The migrant women were always careful to choose the right person to whom they should send remittances, bearing in mind the proper use of money for their children and households. They also wished to control money by making decision on the areas of various household matters. This approach indicates a reshaping of gender relationships in their families.

Mothers' migration has long-lasting and incompatible effects on children. Many conclusions have been drawn on the impacts on unaccompanied children. Clearly, the mother always tends to migrate to improve her family rather than her own freedom. At first, the study stated that the education status of stay-behind children had improved, such as accessibility of learning materials, good tutoring and better schooling. There were some cases of not going to school, failures and dropout of school for stay-behind children. This was probably due to the absence of the mother and lack of care. Secondly, the medical care status of the stay-behind children had also upgraded. Food and nutrition were another important elements here. The caregiver admitted that the food intake status had improved a lot as the mother regularly sent money, so they could spend more money on food. For the treatment of children, they went to the local doctor mostly, as it was familiar to them. Few of them brought the children to the government hospital, private clinic and pediatricians, depending on the complication of the diseases. Visiting the local doctor is not always advised and is least preferred among all the options mentioned here. However, it was only for the easy accessibility, low cost and avoiding the long queue of the government hospital that children were brought to them. Thirdly, the psychosocial issue was

more sensitive to the children. The children had both positive and negative views of their mother's migration. The research shows that for some reasons, children were positive about their mother's migration, such as mothers sending remittances for their well-being, children receiving foreign gifts, ability to buy food and new clothes according to their desires, receiving regular phone and sometimes video calls from mother which reduces their distance. There are some cited reasons why children could not take their mother's migration easily, such as missing their mother, feeling sad, depressed, losing their self-esteem in their mother's absence, losing interest in regular work, and sometimes engaging in crime and drug addiction.

It is not easy to conclude that the influences of mother's migration on unaccompanied children are merely positive or negative. This research found mixed outcomes of positive and negative impacts. In this case, economic benefits compensate for social costs. Remittance sent by the mother helps the children to get better education, food, health and recreation. Social costs, on the other hand, overshadow economic benefits. To children, being with their mother is a great cost than wealth; besides, a mother's affection cannot be replaced by anyone.

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