CHAPTER – VI

CASE STUDIES

Annually, hundreds of unskilled mainly male workers, migrate to the Middle East countries often ending up doing "dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs". Usually concerns about migrants relate to poor working conditions or even exploitation. But there is another face - of those that are left behind - the spouses of migrants. Malar and Sumathi are two such women. Often forgotten and left behind, they wait for their husbands' return, sometimes for years and without news.

Case Study 1 - Malar

I am 32 years old and married when I was 17 years old. I hardly spent a week with my husband when he packed off to Kuwait. I wanted to live my life with him and raise children together. I miss him very much. He works there as a car mechanic. The next time I saw him was three years later. I almost forgot how he looked and sounded. I kept seeing an old picture of his taken during our marriage. He sends me only Rs.4000 a month out of which I have to manage household expenses, the education of my children and repay the 1, 50,000 debts to the agent. He returned in between, but it has been more than ten years that he is working abroad. Earlier my children missed him but now they are used to his absence. It is very hard to raise children alone. I am lonely, have little money and have nobody to share my thoughts with. Every time I talk to a man, the people in my community think I am a loose woman. Some have secretly complained to him that I am seeing other men. Nobody cares that a woman too can suffer and feel tormented that her husband can find another woman to keep him company. Life goes on and I don't know if he will ever come back for good. But I hope he will someday."
Unlike Malar, Sumathi is recently married and reveals the other side of the story - the problems she faces when her husband returns.

**Case Study 2 - Sumathi**

I am 29 years old and married three years ago. My husband works in Dubai, welding and fitting steel pipes in an oil company. He calls me once in a week and sends me 5000 a month. I am part of the women self help group (SHG) made of spouses of migrants and outreach workers that regularly meets once a month to discuss about our problems. It is in these meetings that I learnt about HIV and AIDS and how migrants can be vulnerable to this disease when working abroad and unknowingly pass it on to their spouses. When my husband returns after every six months, sex is first on the agenda. He may have been with other women and I did not want to take the risk so I insisted that he visit the voluntary counseling and testing centre (VCTC). At first he was angry that I doubted him and he felt cheated. He started to doubt that I was unfaithful to him. He was also unhappy that I was making decisions and talking about things that women should not be concerned about. I was worried that he would abandon me for another more docile woman. But I persisted and after much negotiation, we finally went to the VCTC. Now he is aware of HIV and how dangerous it is and we take measures to stay safe. We go there together almost every time he is back."

Today both, Malar and Sumathi participate regularly in the meetings. While Sumathi plans to have a baby and convince her husband to return, Malar has become an outreach worker to give hope and courage to many like her.
Case Study 3 - Sameera Begum

The respondents also reported that the longer the duration of their husbands’ outside employment was, the greater they had power over their husbands. Nearly all of the respondents of the nuclear households reported that their husbands’ respect to them had increased and they had started to listen to and comply with what their wives say.

When my husband migrated, he did not come home for one and a half years. I was alone with my children and did everything myself. I did not need anybody, I was self-sufficient. I was able to save some money from my husband’s remittances and also from my own earnings and managed to rent a better house in a fancier neighborhood than ours. My husband came to this new house and saw what I had done. He was shocked at first and could not believe that a woman could do such things, but later he appreciated it and was proud of me. Now, he never objects to what I say and he does whatever I ask or tell him to do.

Case Study 4 - Basanthi Banu

Parallel to the increment in the freedom of movement, 3 women in the nuclear families took up outside employment after their husbands’ migration. One of them reported that her husband had not been in favor of her employment when he was in Bahrain. When he left, taking advantage of her husband’s absence, the interviewee started to look for a job. After some time, she managed to find a job as a cook in a restaurant and has been working there for 6 years now. She said that her husband was not against her working now; on the contrary she reported that he found it useful especially during the time he spent in Middle East country and stayed unemployed till the next contract, that is, at times when they were in need of money.
Case Study 5 - Esther

Another interviewee opened a small shop with her husband’s remittances and has been running it for 3 years now. She said that her life had changed and had become “colorful” with the shop. Her husband also was very content with this situation, both in terms of his wife’s happiness and in terms of securing their savings, earning relatively good money. This entrepreneur woman also attributes very nice meanings to her shop and her new job; she says that she found herself very useful then and had a goal in her life; “a real goal”.

Case Study 6 - Balammal

Another woman I interviewed, who bought a new house in Melapalayam two years ago, reports how her life has changed: We used to live in a squatter house in nearby Melapalayam. It was not a very good neighborhood. I hardly went out of the house. Sometime after of my husband’s employment, we managed to buy a house in Melapalayam; we now have a big flat. I have made new friends there. They are nice people. They persuaded me to go to the Adult Education Center of the Municipality and took literacy courses. I can read and write now. Moreover, we are currently attending sewing courses of Municipality and sell our products in our school garden every Saturday.

For these women, their husbands’ migration has been an opportunity to get some sort of freedom in the way that they want and they choose. Such changes, especially in women’s employment and autonomy are attributed great importance for women’s empowerment as indispensable characteristics of empowerment In that sense, to sum up, although some of the women have been feeling restricted and have lost their say on family matters and in decisions concerning important issues after migration, some of the women I
interviewed, particularly the ones living in nuclear families, have been going through a relief not only in terms of autonomy and employment but also in decision making (by gaining more say) and especially in terms of self esteem.

**Case Study 7 - Selvamani**

Freedom of movement of the respondents and its changes after their husbands’ migration is again very much related with the family structure. The respondents who reported a change in the household composition after the migration, both the ones moving in with their parents’ place or with their in-laws’, also reported a drastic decrease in their freedom of movement.

Selvamani who works as a dressmaker in a workshop and who moved to her parent’s house describes her life: I spend all my days between home and work. I do not have anything else now. My parents see me as the property of my husband and want to protect me. Therefore, I do not have a social life anymore, except for small weekend trips with my family. We used to go to Kumari and Rosemarry with my friends at work and do some shopping or I used to take the kids out to parks etc. Now, I can hardly do such things and I am getting more and more depressed every day. Thank god I have a few friends in the neighborhood, sometimes we go to each other’s place, drink coffee and chat.

**Case Study 8 - Harini**

The situation of the women who reside in their husbands’ family house is even worse. They hardly go outside of the house unattended. Five women out of 7 reported that they never leave the town in the absence of their husbands and therefore, they can hardly see their