Chapter VII

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION
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7.1: Introduction

This study intended to ascertain the impact of male emigration on the roles of left-behind women, with specific focus on their decision-making power, attitude and activity profiles. There are several factors which can affect women’s decision-making power, and their roles in the households, in general. This study hypothesized that the important determinants were the absence of husbands from the households and the duration of their stay abroad. The other factors considered significant by this study were the extent of contact between the husbands and the left-behind wives, and the type of family system in which the women lived. The research also took into account some of the socioeconomic and demographic variables such as the number of children, women’s age, educational levels of husband and wife, household income, and the wife’s parents’ income. The rationale underlying the selection of these variables was discussed in the earlier chapters.

The study also explored the impact of male emigration on women’s attitudes. It was hypothesized that, due to emigration and longer duration of husbands’ stay abroad, the left-behind women were likely to become less traditional in their attitudes about some of the issues such as girls’ education, segregation of schools for girls and boys, job permission, marriage age for girls, dowry system, and gender equality.
The study also focused on the activity profiles of the women in the sample households. The study hypothesized that due to the migration of husbands from the households, and due to higher incomes as a result of the remittances, the traditional roles of women regarding performance of various activities might have undergone changes. Various data analysis methods were used to describe the samples used in the study, and to test the study’s hypotheses. The first section of this chapter contains discussion and conclusions based on social demographic characteristics of the households. The second section focuses on impact of migration on women’s decision-making power and the family system. The third section deals with the attitudes of women, their roles and the activity profiles in the households. Toward the end of the chapter, implications for future research and policies are discussed.

7.2: Back ground information

A majority of the migrant respondents (48%) were in the age group of 31 to 45 years. 44 per cent of the migrant respondent’s husbands were above 25-35 years old. 46 per cent of the members were Hindus, 35 per cent were Muslims and only 19 per cent were Christians. Almost 74 per cent of the respondents were from the backward community. The SC/ST population however is less than the national average which is 12 per cent. Thus, it is evident from overall education levels for men and women in the migrant households are higher than for non-migrant households. Almost all of them working in the Middle East countries are unskilled labourers. Thus, the occupational classification is based on their educational qualification. An annual remittance of the sample shows that more than half of them (49%) remit Rs 50001 to 96000. 29 percent of them between 10000 to 50000 while 22 percent of them remit above 96001 to 150000 per annum.
7.3: Socio-Demographic Profiles

The data analyses show that the average household size in the sample population is 4.41 and 3.8 for the migrant and non-migrant households, respectively. These averages are greater than the average household size in the Melapalayam-South (Tirunelveli District), which are 4.2. This indicates that the area Melapalayam-South has comparatively larger families. The demographic profile of the migrant households shows that there are more male and female members under 18 years of age in the migrant households compared to non-migrant households. Furthermore, migrant households also have more female members over 18 years of age. However, in the non-migrant households there are more males who are over 18 years of age. One of the possible explanations for fewer male members over 18 in the migrant households can be the emigration of young males form these households.

The data show that the households of the migrants are larger than the non-migrant households. The reason for larger household size can be the type of family structure in the migrant households. The migrant families have a higher percentage of extended families compared to non-migrant households. The extended families usually have a greater number of family members compared to nuclear families. One of the reasons for greater number of extended families in the migrant households can be that with the absence of husbands from the households, wives may feel more secure to living in extended families, and also their husbands would have better chances to migrate since care is available for their left-behind wives and children in the extended families.
The education level of the residents in village Melapalayam-South is moderate. However, it is depressingly low among the females. In the migrant households, 20 percent of the women have no formal education. Among the non-migrant households illiteracy among women goes up to 29 percent.

The migrant households have higher incomes due to the remittances. Compared to the average annual household income for Melapalayam-South (Tirunelveli District) is Rs. 25,572, the migrant household income is Rs 66,426. These migrant households also own more acreage of farm land than the non-migrant households. In the surveyed households none of the respondent women own land or a business, and very few own houses. Another reason for excluding women from ownership of property may be that land is a very common source for conflict among the families. According to Quddus (1987), those who own most land also occupy the highest social status in the society. In the patriarchal society of the India, women are therefore kept from owning any land or property, lest they assume power and influence.

7.4: Women’s Decision-Making Power

In every aspect of decision making, it can be concluded that women not living with their husband have more authority as compared to wives of non-migrant. For women staying with husbands, most of the decisions are either taken by husband alone or jointly. There have less authority to alone. Left behind women are increasingly becoming more self reliant, have a great sense of contact with the outside world brought about by the necessity to manage financial affairs, have more freedom to make their own decisions regarding day to day living as well as longer term decisions for children’s well being, have greater physical mobility and find increased opportunities for dealing with various activity. Left behind women have a greater role in family
decision making and be able to put aside norms of female seclusion since husband’s absence would increase the need for their participation and leadership in day to day affairs of the family. Moreover, migration introduces new ideas and attitudes in men which may ultimately change gender roles in the family. Migration can also bring about dramatic transformation in the traditional values, beliefs, and attitudes among women.

Left behind women can lead increasing independence, autonomy and social status, better access to resources, can develop innate capacity for decision making, develop their own coping strategies. The absence of their husband makes left-behind women more active in community development activities and farming. The husband’s absence, increased economic resources at the disposal of the wife and the expansion of space and communication in public affairs (such as banking, schooling of children) have all been instrumental in transforming a shy, dependent woman into a self-confident autonomous manager with a status quo equal to that of any man in the neighbourhood.

As discussed in chapter Three, there were various factors which determine status, authority, and power structure in the households. In India, the status and power are based on the ownership of land and wealth, which are mostly in the hands by men. As such, women’s influence in the household affairs and decision-making is limited. However, with the migration of husbands from the households it was hypothesized that the traditional arrangements in the households with regard to women’s role might have undergone changes. The present research was an attempt to examine the effect of male migration on the existing roles of women with regard to their decision-making in the households.
The main factors believed to be affecting women’s decision-making power in the households were migration status, duration of husbands’ stay abroad, and family structure. The results produced by the research support both of these hypotheses: (a) migration and duration of husbands’ stay abroad give women more decision-making opportunities, and (b) women in extended families tend to make fewer decisions. Migration of husbands and duration of husbands’ stay abroad are positively related to women’s decision-making, implying that if husbands are absent from the households for longer duration, more decisions are made by women. However, as discussed in the reviewed literature, family structure is an important factor in the decision-making process also. In extended families, where there are other people who control resources and also have the authority to decide important matters, wives have limited or no power to make significant decisions, regardless of their husbands’ migration and length of stay abroad. Thus, family structure has a significant relationship with women’s decision-making power.

The results also show that in migrant households where husbands own property, women tend to make more decisions. However, in the non-migrant households, ownership of property by the husbands is not associated with more decision-making power for women. This shows an interesting relationship between the women’s decision-making power, husbands’ absence, ownership of property by the husbands, and family structure.

In migrant households, women who live in extended families have less decision-making power. But, if their husbands own property, then women tend to make more decision. Thus, in the absence of their husbands, and the fact that their husbands own property, wives achieve more decision-making power in the households. It also shows the significance of control over resources. Although the husbands own the property, it is an indirect source of power for the
wives, which enables them to make more decisions. On the other hand, in non-migrant households, the ownership of property by husbands does not affect women’s decision-making power. One obvious reason is the presence of husbands in the households.

The reviewed literature suggested various sources of power for women, some derived from men and some achieved independently of men. One of the hypothesized sources of power for women in this study was the emigration of husbands, which results in the absence of husbands from the households. The results of the study support the idea that men’s migration is a source of power for the left behind women. The results show that women in the migrant households have more decision-making power and the husbands duration of stay has a positive association with women’s decision-making power.

The study’s results also support the proposition that power can be derived by women independently of men, based on Rothschild’s model. One power base is women’s age. It was hypothesized that age has a positive relationship with the decision-making power of women in the households. In other words, older women in the households are likely to make more decisions. With the increase in women’s age, their position in the household is elevated giving them greater opportunity to decide various households’ matters. The results discussed in the previous chapter show the significance of age of decision-making.

Another factor considered by this study in women’s power base in the household was their socioeconomic background. As mentioned by Rothschild, women’s parents’ socioeconomic status affects their power base in their husbands’ households. It was hypothesized that women whose parents have higher socioeconomic status in the community, would decide more matters in their households, or their husbands would consult them more often before making important
decisions. The results of this study support their assumption and show a positive association between women’s decision-making and parents’ income. This means that women whose parents have higher socioeconomic status (higher incomes) tend to make more decisions in the households.

According to this research, the presence of husbands in the household has a strong negative effect on wives’ decision-making power. Therefore, with the migration of husbands, wives have more opportunity to exercise their authority in households and make more decisions. This change in women’s role indicates elevation in their status, empowering them to regulate their lives and decide for themselves and for their families. Some of the respondents stated that husbands often expressed their unhappiness if wives made routine decisions in the household. Nevertheless, these respondents said that if was up to the women to decide for themselves. This is a substantial change in the traditional role and attitudes of women in a traditional society, and a significant step toward improving the condition of women in the conservative society.

The results also indicate that family structure is an important factor in decision-making. Women who live in extended families have little say in important household matters. Hence, migration of husbands form the extended households does not affect the authority pattern. But, for women who are living in nuclear families and whose husbands are abroad, their role in the households has changed quite significantly. They have to deal independently with numerous household issues which gives them self-confidence.
In the early stage of the absence of husbands from the households the left-behind women may need the assistance of other family members to take care of various family responsibilities. This may compel them to live in extended families. However, with the passage of time they apparently become more confident and begin to take more active role in the management of their household affairs. This may gradually lead to a strong desire for nuclearization another among the migrant households. Another factor which also contributes to the desire for nuclearization is the presence of remittances in the households. The study data show that the majority of the women in the migrant households have control over the remittances. There are comparatively more female-headed households in the migrant sample, and with the longer duration of husbands’ stay abroad women tend to live more in nuclear families.

From this research it can be concluded that structural changes in the family system are critical if women wish to have more freedom in the decision-making proves in the household. The study results show that a structural transformation in the families is taking place and there is a trend toward nuclearization in the wake of migration. There are a large number of households which are headed by the left-behind women.

Migration and higher incomes from remittances are providing leverage to women to break away from the extended family system. An elderly woman during the interview remarked that daughters-in-law do not like to live in extended families; however, men are very strict and do not want their wives to become independent and force them to live in the extended families. Nevertheless, if husbands are away for a long time from the households, their hold and authority in the household may not remain as strong, and the wives may begin to exercise their own control which could result in the nuclearization of families.
7.5: Women' Attitudes

Migration is playing an important role in women’s attitude level. The migrants have and contact with new foreign culture and gain new experiences, which could bring about changes in their attitudes and ideas. Some of these new ideas may be transmitted to the left behind women, making them less conservative toward gender issues. Simultaneously, it was also reasoned that women who have to shoulder more responsibilities and make more decisions in the absence of their husband should be less under the control of their husbands and more aware of their potential to expand beyond their traditional roles. Thus, the left-behind women were expected to have more attitudes on gender issues such as girls receiving schooling, gender equality, importance and maintenance of the dowry system, and need for women to get permission to work outside the home.

Women’s attitude levels in non-migrant households are more traditional. They are supporting the existing gender inequality and the patriarchal ideology and accepting the superiority of males among non-migrant households. Non migrant households’ women were more traditional attitudes towards these issues such as levels on job permission, women’s rights to speak on household matters, spending on dowry and preference for husband to consult with wives.

The study hypothesized that emigration of men is a source of new ideas and attitudes both for the migrants and for their families, especially for the left-behind women. The migrants have and contact with new foreign culture and gain new experiences, which could bring about changes in their attitudes and ideas. It was hypothesized that with the regular contact and visits of husbands back home, some of these new ideas may be transmitted to the left-behind women, making them less conservative toward gender issues. Contrary to this hypothesis, the results show that
migration has not had any significant effect on women’s attitudes. It was, however, interesting to note that the only significant factor which played an important role in modernizing women’s ideas about gender was their level of education. The results show a significant positive association between women’s education and modern attitudes regarding issues like girls’ marriage age, girls’ education, segregated schooling, job permissions, and gender equality. The study’s results emphasize and confirm the already existing evidence of the effects of women’s education on their lives. As stated by Summer (1992), education is the most influential investment in the economic and social development of a nation. Thus, education is the single most important way to empower women to break away from the older conservative attitudes.

There are also a few other factors which play significant roles in molding women’s attitudes. It was expected that age has a negative relationship with modern attitudes. However, the study’s results suggest that in the migrant households age has a positive association with modern attitudes, implying that older, left-behind women are less conservative. In the non-migrant households, however, the relationship between women’s age and modern ideas is negative. One possible explanation can be the effect of duration of husbands’ stay abroad, even though it is not statistically significant. Due perhaps to the longer stay of husbands abroad, women have developed less conservative attitudes. One of the respondents’ views about girls’ marriage indicate a positive change. She observed that marriage for girls at a younger age was not good. Young girls are unable to handle new responsibilities and suffer from the heavy burdens of household chores. On the other hand, an older woman in one of the surveyed households commented that the migration of husbands has made women bold and outgoing, so much so that they have forced their migrant husbands into submission. These views are indicative of the
displeasure of older women with the changed attitudes and independent behaviour of the left-behind women.

The study’s results also show the effects of women’s age, education, and extent of contact between husbands and wives on the views of women regarding gender equality. From the results it can be concluded that in the migrant households women’s education has a strong positive in gender equality, implying that educated women believe in gender equality. However, in the migrant households the frequency of husbands’ visits has a negative association with the issue of gender equality. This means that husbands’ greater contact with their wives and more frequent visits back home reinforce that more traditional attitudes of inequality of gender and the superiority of males among the left-behind women.

As indicated by some of the results, migrant households have more positive attitude toward girls’ education. The respondents expressed the belief that education makes girls more alert and brave. There are fewer women in the migrant households who are in favour of girls staying home instead of going to school. However, there is a stronger preference for boys’ education. A majority of the women desired college-level education for their boys, but only high school-level education for their girls.

In terms of elevation of status of women, migration is playing an important role. It has given women an opportunity to decide matters related to their lives and their household, and also to gain confidence and empowerment. Migration, along with many other factors, is enabling women to make such decisions which result in a better life not only for themselves but also for their families.
7.6: Roles/Activity Profiles

The migrant households have higher annual income due to the remittances and average of Rs 60,000 per year as against the national average of Rs 25,572. This is quite high considering the low wages in the area and low level of education in the households. On the contrary, in the non-migrant households the average income is Rs 28,000 per year. Higher incomes have changed to some extent the daily pattern of activities and life-style of the left-behind families.

The data also indicate that migrant households have more household possession such as electric and electronic goods which are helpful in reducing time and labour for women in households chores. These gadgets are also a source of information for women as they need to know how to operate these appliances. These modern products also symbolize a trend toward a new life-style. Because of the presence of these electric and other goods in the households women are saving time and energy and using them to their advantage.

During the survey it was observed that women and children in the migrant households were generally neatly dressed and the houses were clean. It was interesting to note that the older women were critical of the change in the living style of women. An older woman remarked during an interview that these days young women did not do much “productive work,” but they were rather busy all the time in “bathing and cleaning children and dressing up themselves.” By lack of “productive work” she perhaps was alluding to the lack of interest among younger women to raise cattle for milk or to make milk products, or to sew and stitch to save money.
Higher income and help from modern goods in the households have affected the daily activity-pattern of the left-behind women. There are only a few women who are still involved in the collection of wood, carrying of water, hauling of fodder, and similar other strenuous tasks in the households. In most of the migrant households, however, women continue to be involved in cooking, cleaning, washing, and other traditional housekeeping chores. In a few cases, cooking is done by some other family members, such as the daughters. The distribution of food continues to be done mostly by women. The study data also showed that about five percent of men were involved in household chores as well.

As reported by some of the respondents during the survey, life for women has generally become more relaxed as they now have more leisure time due to the presence of modern gadgets and increased earnings in the households in the wake of their husbands’ emigration. The elderly women (the mothers-in-law of the respondents) complained that women were no longer interested in keeping cattle for milk or doing work in the fields. They observed that before the emigration began, women used to work from dawn to dusk, but this was not the case now. The only notable activities which women were doing now were washing, cooking, and raising children.

From the overall analysis of data, it can be argued that the daily life-style of women in the migrant households has undergone substantial changes in the wake of emigration of their men, and as a result they have assumed new responsibilities and new roles. The data also show that there are very few women who are self-employed or employed for wages (4.3 percent). The reasons reported were that (a) enough income was already available in the households; (b) the women generally lacked marketable skills; and (c) the husbands’ permission for their wives to work for wages was lacking.
Another likely reason for not allowing women to work for wages or other income generating activities may be that in traditional society women are generally not encouraged to go out and work, especially with other men. The involvement of women in outdoor jobs or other income generating activities also depends on the households’ socioeconomic status. There are certain castes which allow women to do outdoor jobs, especially women from poor households.

As suggested in some studies (Abbasi & Irfan, 1986), emigration of male members and the remittances have negatively affected women’s labour force participation and income generating activities. Higher incomes from remittances have raised the status of migrant families in the community. It is interesting to note that there are fewer women in the migrant households who are in favour of permission for women to work than in the non-migrant households. In the migrant households the majority of women said that women should not do any kind of job for wages.

In the surveyed households, most of the property-land, house, or business-is generally owned by the husbands or by other family members. The majority of women do not own any property. Only three percent of women own a house. This is an indication of low control of women over the household resources. Their education level is low and their participation in income generating activities is limited. Therefore, women are in a traditionally subservient role. However, the results show that due to the migration of men, women now have more control and spending power over money. In the migrant households, 49 percent women control money compared to 17.7 percent in the non-migrant households. Similarly, there are more left-behind women who decide about spending money either on their own or jointly with their husbands. This pattern of control over resources is a sure sign of the new role for the left-behind women.
With the migration of husbands from the households, women are now increasingly getting more involved in activities which are traditionally considered to be in men’s domain. Now more women are engaging in banking, shopping, taking sick children to the doctor, and management of the property. These activities require women to go out and have contact and interaction with other men, which would be characterized as non-traditional activities for women. These new responsibilities have provided an opportunity for women to communicate with other agencies and individuals other than their own family members. This new trend of women’s involvement in outside activities indicates a clear departure from the traditional social organization as mentioned by Korson (1978). According to Korson, girls are socialized to be dependent on men and not to be self-reliant. However, the changed circumstances of women in the migrant households have made them more confident and independent in managing their own lives.

7.7: Conclusion

The results show that migration itself, and longer durations of absence of husbands from the households, increase the number of decisions women make. However, there are no effects of greater contact of husbands with their left-behind wives on their decision-making power. Women who live in nuclear families make more decisions than women in extended families. Women whose husbands own property have a greater say in household decisions. The longer the duration of absence of husbands from the households, the more likely it is that women will be residing in female-headed households.
The results indicate that migration of husbands change the attitude of women in different aspects. Education is an important determinant of modern attitudes, while migration and longer duration of husbands’ stay abroad have no appreciable effect on women’s attitudes. The extended family has a negative association with women’s modern attitudes related to gender issues. Migration has not affected women’s daily activity pattern, but a higher proportion of left-behind women are involved in activities which require their going outside the homes. However, women are not involved in outside jobs or income generating activities, nor are they actively involved in agriculture-related tasks.

In every aspect of decision making, it can be concluded that women not living with their husband have more authority as compared to wives of non-migrant. For women staying with husbands, most of the decisions are either taken by husband alone or jointly. There have less authority to alone. Left behind women are increasingly becoming more self reliant, independence, autonomy and social status, better access and control over resources, can develop innate capacity for decision making, develop their own coping strategies, have a great sense of contact with the outside world brought about by the necessity to manage financial affairs, have more freedom to make their own decisions regarding day to day living as well as longer term decisions for children’s well being, have greater physical mobility and find increased opportunities for dealing with various activities. The husband’s absence, increased economic resources at the disposal of the wife and the expansion of space and communication in public affairs (such as banking, schooling of children) have all been instrumental in transforming a shy, dependent woman into a self-confident autonomous manager with a status quo equal to that of any man in the neighbourhood.
Left behind women have a greater role in family decision making and be able to put aside norms of female seclusion since husband’s absence would increase the need for their participation and leadership in day to day affairs of the family. Moreover, migration introduces new ideas and attitudes in men which may ultimately change gender roles in the family. Migration can also bring about dramatic transformation in the traditional values, beliefs, and attitudes among women.

However, the changed circumstances of women in the migrant households have made them more confident and independent in managing their own lives. It is also evidenced that women become empowered if opportunities are given.

7.8: Implications for Future Research and Policies

From this study at least two factors have emerged as affecting women in significant ways. These factors are: (a) the absence of husbands from the households as a result of their emigration, and (b) women’s education. The first factor is obviously a direct consequence of emigration, while the second factor has a notable impact on women independent of emigration.

Women in migrant households have assumed new responsibilities and roles and are more actively involved in the decision-making process as a result of their husbands’ absence. It is very important that their particular impact on women’s lives should be further researched so that appropriate policies, based on empirical data, may be evolved which take into consideration this significant change and capitalize on it by involving women in rural development, focusing on girls’ education, income generating activities, economically productive utilization of remittances, family planning, health and nutrition, and reduction in gender disparity.
Based on the findings of this research, it is proposed that some extension and communication programmes for the left-behind women focusing on emotionally productive utilization of remittances may be started. Efforts should be made to utilize the available household resources such as tape recorders for disseminating information on health, nutrition, and family planning. Furthermore, left-behind women should be educated in the efficient and effective use of available electric and electronic goods.

Education emerged as the single most important determinant toward evolving less conservative and less traditional attitudes among women. This research was further substantiated the past claims of the effects of education on an individual’s life. This research has shown that more educated women tend to exhibit more modern attitudes toward social issues. This finding has an important policy implication, which is to make education more freely available in the rural areas both for boys and girls. More educated individuals in society, especially women, will hopefully eliminate some of the discrimination and prejudice. They will also be more productive and prosperous, thus raising the overall standard of life in the country.

In conclusion, it is important to suggest that since women are making more decisions in the absence of their husbands, they can be encouraged to educate their children, especially daughters. Government therefore, needs to emphasize female education and explore other ways to exploit women’s new role.