

Beyond the Children Migration: Centring Gendered Vulnerabilities of Left-Behind Elderly Parents

Sheikh Qazzafi, Dr. Rafidah Binti Othman & Dr. Nur Azam Anuarul Perai

Azman Hashim International Business School, University of Technology Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

Email: zafisheikhindia@gmail.com

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Abstract

Background Despite the growing literature on left behind parents, gender impact on left behind parents remains limited. This study addresses the research gap by understanding the impact, challenges, and coping mechanisms of left behind parents different from each other.

Method This study is based on the qualitative approach based on 7 personal interviews consisting of 2 father and 5 mother direct from the left behind parents in Uttar Pradesh, the largest population state in India. Thematic analysis was used on NVivo. **Findings** The findings underscore how the mother and father have experienced distinct impacts, challenges, and methods for coping. While mothers have more significant social interaction, fathers gain respect from the community. Despite these benefits, both parents face emotional distress from their children's migration. **Conclusion** The study explores the gap in the current literature on gender-based impact on left behind parents. The parents are emotionally void, but their social and economic perceptions are different from each other. Future studies might consider quantitative methods and the long-term emotional impact of migration on left behind elderly parents. This research suggests developing policies that cater to the particular needs of elderly parents based on their gender rather than viewing them as homogeneous.

Keywords: International Migration, Left Behind Families, Elderly Parents, Labour Migration, Children Migration

Introduction

International migration has become a defining feature of the 21st century, with around 281 million people living outside their country of origin in 2020, representing 3.6% of the world's population (IOM, 2024). While migration can generate economic opportunities for migrants and their families, it also produces complex social, emotional, and structural consequences for those who remain in the country of origin. Among the most affected are *left-behind*

families—a diverse group that includes spouses, children, parents, and siblings—who face varied challenges arising from the absence of a migrating member. In particular, elderly parents of adult migrants often navigate profound emotional, physical, and social changes when their children move abroad for employment.

This phenomenon must be situated within broader demographic and social transformations. Across many countries, population ageing, declining fertility rates, and increasing rural-to-urban and international migration have reshaped traditional family structures, weakening the intergenerational co-residence and caregiving patterns that once ensured elder support (Huang et al., 2016; Kaur & Sinha, 2023). From a family sociology perspective, the outmigration of adult children reconfigures household roles, redistributes care responsibilities, and alters patterns of economic dependence. Migration studies highlight that while remittances can improve material well-being, they cannot fully compensate for the loss of physical proximity, caregiving, and emotional connection (Zickgraf, 2016; Kumar, 2023). Gender studies further reveal that the migration of daughters, in particular, disrupts culturally embedded caregiving norms, intensifying stressors for elderly parents (Kumar, 2023).

Existing research demonstrates that left-behind elderly parents experience a range of economic, health, and social consequences. Financially, many depend on remittances to meet daily expenses and healthcare needs, yet this support can be unstable due to job insecurity or declining remittance flows over time (Cai et al., 2021; Zickgraf, 2016). Physically, prolonged separation from children has been linked to increased incidence of chronic illnesses, stress-related ailments, and reduced well-being (Kaur & Sinha, 2023; Mandal & Paul, 2024). Psychologically, feelings of loneliness, sadness, and anxiety are common, often exacerbated by concerns over their children's safety and settlement abroad (Kaur et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Socially, many report isolation and the transformation of their households into “empty nests” (Kaur et al., 2024), with reduced social participation.

Despite this growing body of work, there is limited scholarship that disaggregates these impacts by gender, exploring how mothers and fathers may experience their children's migration differently. Gendered caregiving expectations, social support networks, and emotional coping strategies suggest that the migration of adult children—whether sons or daughters—may have distinct consequences for each parent (Kumar, 2023). Addressing this gap is essential for designing responsive social protection measures that account for the differentiated needs of elderly men and women. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the gendered social, economic, and emotional impacts of adult children's migration on elderly parents in India. By situating the analysis within the intersecting frameworks of family sociology, gender studies, and migration research, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how global migration trends reshape intergenerational relationships and elder well-being in the country of origin.

Adult Migration and Left-behind Older Parents

The lives of left-behind parents are impacted across various aspects following their children's migration (Kaur & Sinha, 2023). Parental experiences of children's migration vary depending on their residence, gender, age, and employment status (Huang et al., 2016). They spend a substantial part of their lives alone (Kaur et al., 2024). Many elderly parents depend on remittances from their migrant children; however, this financial support remains uncertain

due to job instability or economic downturns of children (Zickgraf, 2016). Those parents lacking personal savings or pension plans were particularly at risk, as they could not cover medical expenses and lacked access to health insurance or pension schemes. Consequently, they are dependent on the remittances from their migrant children to finance healthcare needs, though this support is often unreliable (Zickgraf, 2016). Initially, adult children who migrate farther from their elderly parents tend to provide more significant financial support; however, this assistance gradually declines over time (Cai et al., 2021). In some cases, parents faced financial hardship, burdened by debts incurred from commission agents and banks to finance their children's migration while also grappling with concerns over their long-term financial security (Kaur et al. 2024).

The migration of children also affects the health of left-behind parents (Huang et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2024), as prolonged separation disturbs their physical (Kaur & Sinha, 2023; Mandal & Paul, 2024) and mental health (Kaur & Sinha, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Left-behind parents commonly experience physical health issues such as joint pain, stress, heart disease, and diabetes in the absence of their migrated children. In addition, they face psychological challenges (Kaur et al., 2024) struggling with emotional distress when their children migrate (Kaur & Sinha, 2023; Mandal & Paul, 2024). Feeling of sadness (Kaur & Sinha, 2023) and loneliness (Kaur & Sinha, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022; Kaur et al., 2024), depressive symptoms (Mandal & Paul, 2024), stress (Kaur et al., 2024), feeling uncared, overthinking, insecurities (Kaur et al., 2024) and increased responsibilities (Zhang et al., 2022; Kaur et al., 2024) are commonly reported. The tension and anxiety primarily stem from concerns about their children's future and settlement (Kaur et al., 2024). Left-behind parents experience emotional distress when their migrant children are unable to attend relatives' illnesses and grandparents' funerals (Zickgraf, 2016). In addition to emotional challenges, they encounter social difficulties, with social isolation being the most significant concern (Kaur et al., 2024). They often perceive their homes as "empty nests" (Kaur et al., 2024). Moreover, the farther children migrate, the less frequently they visit their parents (Cai et al., 2021).

The critical dimension of children's migration is its gendered impact, specifically when daughters migrate, significantly affecting left-behind elderly parents (Kumar, 2023). The theoretical perspectives from family sociology, gender studies, and migration research suggest that women's migration for employment introduces distinct stressors for left-behind family members, exceeding the potential improvements in material well-being that migration may bring from migration (Kumar, 2023). Existing research has examined various impacts on left-behind parents, including economic and emotional effects (Kaur & Sinha, 2023), physical health (Huang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022; Mandal & Paul, 2024), mental health (Mandal & Paul, 2024), caregiving responsibilities (Zickgraf, 2016), remittance support (Mandal & Paul, 2024; Cai et al., 2021), and socio-psychological challenges (Kaur et al., 2024). However, there is a dearth of literature on the gender-based impact of migration on left-behind parents. Kumar (2023) emphasized the need for future research to consider gender-based heterogeneities, particularly the impact of children migration on left-behind parents, and the importance of integrating these insights into social protection measures for vulnerable elderly populations. The implications of children migration are likely to affect left-behind mothers and fathers in distinct ways (Kumar, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to understand the differential impact of children migration on elderly parents.

Research Questions

1. How do the social, economic, and emotional impacts of international migration vary for left-behind elderly parents based on gender?
2. What distinct challenges do older women encounter compared to older men in the context of their adult children's migration?
3. How do coping mechanisms differ between elderly mothers and fathers due to their adult children's migration?

Significance of the Research

This study understands the gender-based impact on left-behind elderly parents of international migrants. This study is significant as it fills a critical gap in the literature, where the distinct experiences of left-behind mothers and fathers have remained underexplored. The study offers new insights into the gendered dimensions of migration's impact on elderly parents, contributing valuable knowledge to the existing literature on migration studies and informing scholars, researchers, and policymakers working in this field. It also has practical implications for the decision-making process of migrant children residing abroad. This research highlights the challenges elderly parents face, which is essential for enhancing the mental health and well-being of both mothers and fathers, thereby contributing to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, *Good Health and Well-Being*. SDG 3 aims to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages" (United Nation, 2015), primarily focusing on reducing maternal and child mortality, combating major communicable diseases, and addressing substance abuse. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of achieving universal health coverage and prioritizing mental health (World Health Organization, 2015). The efforts to achieve SDG 3 are closely interconnected with other SDGs, such as SDG 1 (*No Poverty*), as poverty significantly contributes to poor health outcomes (United Nation, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing purposeful snowball sampling to gather in-depth insights into the impacts, challenges, and coping strategies experienced by elderly parents left behind following the migration of their children to foreign countries. The participants were selected based on specific criteria, including having at least one child employed as an international labour migrant and residing abroad continuously for a minimum of one year. The sample comprises 6 elderly parents, divided between 2 fathers and 5 mothers. Mothers tend to exhibit stronger emotional bonds and connections with their children compared to fathers; therefore, the sample includes a greater number of mothers than fathers. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with left-behind elderly parents. The study focuses on Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). The analysis was conducted using NVivo software.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (UTM REC) set forth, which are aligned with the International Conference on Harmonization-Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP). As a result, various mechanisms were employed to protect the interests of the participants. The participants' concerns regarding information, understanding, and voluntariness were tackled through informed consent. The consent form was obtained prior to the interview using the audio-recorded agreement and

signed consent form. The participants were told to keep their responses confidential to protect their rights, privacy and safety. I also explained to the participants that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason during the research process, and the recording would be destroyed after all the transcripts were ready. The participants provided consent before the interview through an audio-recorded agreement and a signed consent form. They were informed that their answers would remain confidential to safeguard their rights, privacy, and safety. The participants also made it clear that they could withdraw at any point during the research process without needing to provide a reason. Additionally, it is ensured that recordings will be destroyed once the transcripts are completed, and the participant's identity will be hidden.

Data Findings

Profile of the Respondents

Twenty parents, including 1 father and 5 mothers, participated in the study. Table 1 presents information about the mothers and father. The youngest mother was 52 years old, and the oldest mother was 67, whereas the father reached 73 years of age. In terms of occupation, all the mothers were homemakers except one who was Assistant Professor. However, one mother was social activists. As for the fathers, they were retired. Every parent has more than two children, with one child employed as an international migrant worker. Few mothers come from different districts and villages in Uttar Pradesh. The children of the migrants are primarily located in Gulf countries, though some can also be found in Western nations like England and Germany.

Table 1

Profile of Left-Behind Elderly Parents of International Labour Migrants

Age	Gender	Origin (Uttar Pradesh)	Education Level	Number of Children	Current Work Status	Migrant Child's Country
73-74	Father	Aligarh	PhD	4	Retired	Uzbekistan
55-60	Mother	Village (Aligarh)	8th grade	2	Homemaker	Dubai
52	Mother	Muzaffarnagar	PhD	3	Assistant Professor	England
67	Mother	Aligarh	PGDM	2	Homemaker	Oman
54	Mother	Aligarh	PhD	3	Homemaker & Social Activist	Germany
60	Mother	Lucknow	12th grade	3	Homemaker	Germany
68	Father	Aligarh	Graduation	5	Retired	Saudia Arabia

Emotional Burden of Separation

The elderly left behind parents are in an emotional state. They experience the longing, loneliness, and sadness after the migration of child in foreign country. However, both fathers and mothers experience differently from each other. Fathers often balance their distress with

a sense of pride, framing separation as a necessary sacrifice for economic well-being. Their expressions are measured and rationalized, reflecting emotional restraint. In contrast, mothers display greater openness and intensity in their grief, emphasizing profound emotional loss and attachment. Although some mothers, like fathers, acknowledge pride in their children's achievements, this sentiment remains secondary to their emotional struggle:

"But I'm also proud of him for building a successful career."

While fathers tend to prioritize pride before acknowledging loneliness, mothers frame separation as an ongoing psychological burden rather than a mere disruption of daily life. These gendered differences underscore the need for tailored support systems—fathers may benefit from emotional outlets, while mothers require stronger support networks to navigate the enduring pain of separation.

Fragmented Belonging: Living with Migration

This highlights the left behind elderly parents felt sense of sadness over their children, with their attachment to their nation and apprehension about leaving home to live with their migrant children abroad. However, responses are similar but different father consistently emphasize their strong connection to their homeland and the social fabric that defines their daily lives. They acknowledge the appeal of migrating to live with their children, yet they express an overwhelming reluctance to leave their community and established way of life. Moreover, they tend to hesitate and adjust to visit foreign. In contrast, mothers were held back by cultural and environmental adjustment fears. There is an underlying anxiety about cultural adaptation, indicating that while mothers desire proximity, they feel a deep-seated apprehension about uprooting their lives.

"I think it would be better to live with my children in Canada, but I'm not sure if I can adjust in that environment like cold weather and/or different lifestyle. I'm happy he visit once in a while."

"I would love to live with my children in the UK. However, I am comfortable here, but I miss him a lot."

Remittances and Changing Social Recognition

Remittances sent by migrant children significantly influence the social recognition of left-behind parents, specifically in terms of increased respect and improved social status within their communities. Both father and mothers describe a shift in how they are perceived after their children migrate and start sending remittances. Father consistently highlight improved social standing following their daughter's migration and remittance inflow. The remittances contribute to a transformation in their perceived social prestige. The respect they receive appears to be directly tied to their daughter's financial success abroad. Some express concerns that this newfound social recognition is transactional based on wealth rather than genuine respect.

"People in the village treat me with more respect, but I also feel like they only care because of the money he sends."

On the other hand, mothers also acknowledge increased social recognition due to remittances, but their experiences reflect a different dynamic. Respect is intertwined with

social integration. They report being invited to gatherings and consulted for advice, which suggests that remittances not only elevate their status but also increase their engagement in community life.

"After my daughter moved to the UK, I noticed that people in the village treat me differently."

Communication Patterns and Satisfaction Among Left-Behind Parents

Coping from the impact of international migration of child migration to LBP is communication that differs significantly. The communication patterns between left-behind parents and their migrant children reveal a complex interplay of mode and satisfaction levels. While some parents express satisfaction due to better technology through accessible modes such as video calls and phone calls, others highlight unsatisfactory communication due to the absence of physical presence. Father often focus on communication mode and duration as a coping mechanism to overcome emotional strain, valuing efficiency and information exchange. Many father express satisfaction when their migrant children provide regular updates about work and finances, even if conversations are weekly. In contrast, mothers tend to emphasize mixed satisfaction, appreciating regular contact but missing the physical presence of their daughter. She missed the physical presence of her daughter. She responded:

"The phone calls help me in coping from emotions, but it's not the same as his physical presence here."

"My children calls me once a week, and that's the highlight of my week."

Emotional and Temporal Dynamics of Migrant Visits

The migrants visit plays a crucial role in shaping the coping mechanisms of left-behind fathers or mothers, reflecting distinct emotional and temporal responses. The responses indicate that most migrants visit their parents once a year or once every two years, creating long periods of separation that require different forms of emotional adaptation. Fathers often develop coping mechanisms rooted in routine and acceptance, managing emotional distance by focusing on practical aspects such as financial stability and social networks outside the home. Many fathers redirect their attention to community interactions, religious practices, or household duties to fill the temporal gap between visits. Mothers, however, tend to experience more significant emotional distress, leading to coping strategies centred on emotional connection and anticipation. Visiting once a year is a distressing reason. Additionally, mothers rely more on social and familial support, such as seeking comfort in conversations with neighbours or other family members who share similar experiences.

"But the visits have become shorter because of his busy schedule."

Discussion

The findings indicate that left-behind elderly parents experience varying emotional responses, with mothers suffering profound psychological distress due to migration. The fathers attempt to cope through financial support and household obligations. The findings reveal that the impact of international migration on left-behind parents varies. While women encourage more social interaction by being invited to events and asked for their opinions, fathers gain more respect in the community due to the remittance they send home by their daughters. However, both parents exhibit similar emotional responses due to their children migrating. These findings are supported by research on internal migration, which indicates that social respect benefits left behind parents (Zhao & Shangguan, 2025). The parents were emotionally affected (Thapa et al., 2024; Mandal & Paul, 2024; Antman, 2012), particularly

the mothers, who experienced a more significant impact (Muhammad et al., 2021; Thapa et al., 2024).

Fathers cope with their feelings by engaging in social activities and connecting with others while maintaining open communication with their children. In contrast, mothers cope by maintaining contact with their children, although they still profoundly miss being physically close to them. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting how older parents seek support from neighbours (Concova et al., 2019) and reach out to their children via phone to manage feelings of absence (Baldassar, 2008; Pham & Lim, 2018). One participant's responses in a study suggest that regular communication is the most effective method for coping with their emotional feelings (Ashfaq et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study explores how international migration affects elderly parents who remain behind, along with the variations in coping mechanisms, emphasizing gender differences to assist policymakers in developing more targeted policies for mothers. The findings suggest that the impact of international migration on left behind parents is different. Fathers gain more respect in the community due to remittance inflow, while mothers lead to greater social involvement by being invited to attend gatherings and seek advice. However, both parents are emotionally impacted due to the migration of their children. The results indicate that the impact of international migration on left behind parents varied. Fathers receive increased respect within the community due to the remittance inflow, while mothers experience heightened social engagement through invitations to events and being consulted for their opinions. However, both parents were emotionally impacted due to their children's migration. The challenges parents encounter when migrating abroad with their children are experienced differently by each parent. Fathers often have a strong attachment to their homeland and community, whereas mothers may have concerns about adapting to a different culture and lifestyle.

Fathers cope by remaining resilient, considering sacrifices are crucial for the family's financial security. They cope with their feelings through consistent conversation with their children, accepting their circumstances, and participating in routines, social events, or religious activities. In contrast, mothers cope with their feelings by maintaining communication with their children, yet they still profoundly yearn for their physical presence. Regular phone calls do not entirely alleviate their sense of longing. They endure more emotional turmoil and find solace in conversing with others who relate to their emotions while concentrating on their child's eventual return. This study is limited to qualitative findings from one state in India. Future studies might consider quantitative methods to assess the broader impact of migration on elderly parents in various regions or countries.

Additionally, future investigations could explore the long-term emotional impact of migration on left behind elderly parents. It is vital to comprehend the gender-specific implications of international migration on elderly parents to develop inclusive social policies that prioritize the welfare of parents, particularly mothers. However, previous studies categorize left behind parents as a homogeneous group (Miyawaki & Hooyman, 2023). This research offers a more detailed perspective on how fathers and mothers experience different impacts. Recognizing

this difference is essential for developing policies that cater to the particular needs of elderly parents based on their gender rather than viewing them as a single category.

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