

International Migrant Domestic Workers and the Impact on the Left-Behind Children: A Qualitative Study from Kalimpong

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Abstract:

International Labor migration has led to a significant number of migrant domestic workers globally. According to the ILO (International Labor Organisation), an estimate there are 67.1 million domestic workers, most of whom are women. These women often originate from developing countries and migrate to wealthier countries across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe etc to work as domestic help in private households. The district of Kalimpong, located in the Northern State of West Bengal, has witnessed a growing trend of international labor migration among its female population. Only limited research from the hills of Kalimpong and Darjeeling explores the international migration of women, mainly concentrating on the push and pull factors and the remittances that sustain their families. Guided by Robert Merton's concept of Strain Theory and Anthony Giddens's 'structuration theory' (1984), the present study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to explore the diverse impacts of migration on their left-behind children. The study reveals that children who grow up without maternal care experience behavioural issues, poor academic performances, and psychological distress due to parental separation, highlighting the broader gendered and social dimensions of migration.

Keywords: International migration, Kalimpong, domestic worker, Nepali women.

Introduction

The rising pattern of female migration from the district of Kalimpong, West Bengal, has brought growing concerns about the well-being of the children left at home. A significant proportion of these migrants are mothers employed in developed countries as domestic workers; their absence within the household has directly affected the left-behind children, making it a prominent social cost of migration. The feminisation of migration has become a prominent trend across Asia (Lim Nguyn, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 2007), who have traditionally been the main caregivers and leave home to work as migrant labourers in developed countries, sometimes even surpassing male migrants. When these women migrate, many families are left struggling with a 'care-gap', where children and elderly parents are devoid of emotional and physical support. This development carries major repercussions on the well-being of left-behind children, and it highlights the need to broaden our understanding of the multidimensional layers of impact that need to be understood more fully.

In countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Thailand, and Korea (Hadil, 1999, 2001; Kuhn & Menken, 2002), research indicates that remittances are often used to enhance children's schooling, resulting in positive educational outcomes. In contrast, studies from the Philippines (Battistella and Gas tardo Conaco 1998, p. 232; Asis and Baggio 2003), China (China Daily 2004), and Sri Lanka (Fernando 2001, p. 10) report less favourable findings. Although remittances can help support a child's education, the negative findings suggest that a parent's emotional presence and daily involvement are sometimes so vital that financial support alone cannot replace them.

Left-Behind Children

According to UNICEF, the phrase "the children left behind" refers to Children raised in their home countries or in their countries of habitual residence, who have been left behind by adult migrants responsible for them." One or both parents may leave their children in their country of origin, for short or extended periods of time. The paper by UNICEF titled "Children Left Behind" (2109) clearly states that there are no global estimates of the number of children left behind. Data are not systematically collected worldwide, and different countries use different definitions, time frames, and reporting mechanisms. Although a global estimate isn't available, many national studies offer insights into the scale of the issue. In China, the recorded estimate of left-behind children reached nearly 61 million in a 2013 survey.

Rachel Parrenas, in her work "Children of Global Migration" (2005), mentions that approximately 9 million Filipino children are living apart from one or both parents due to parental migration. The 9 million figure is often described as roughly 27% of the youth population in the Philippines. According to a report by the "Save the Children- titled Sri Lanka's Missing Mothers" (2013), there are more than one million children in Sri Lanka left behind when their mothers migrate abroad for work. Researchers working on left-behind children in Bangladesh have produced a growing body of work that combines household surveys, qualitative fieldwork and program reports. Several studies now cite an approximate national scale of nearly six million children left behind by migrating family members (J. Shimlin, Khanam et al., 2023). In the context of India, most of the empirical studies deal with the number of left-behind children affected by migration (mainly internal, labour migration) rather than explicitly with international parental migration. According to the report "Assessing the portability of social protection and services for children affected by migration across five states-cities (2021), estimates of 20 million left-behind children.

Significance/Relevance

Kalimpong, a district in West Bengal, has experienced significant outmigration among its female population. Most research in Indian states concentrates on internal or labour migration, while research examining left-behind children in the context of international migration remains very limited. Only a few works from the hills

of Kalimpong and Darjeeling deal with this issue; one such work is the study of Ashlesha Rai, “Lived experiences and challenges of women international migrants from Darjeeling District: An Empirical Study (2025). The study primarily focuses on the push and pull factors, the difficulties they face, and the effects of migration on their own lives. The topic of left-behind children appears only in relation to transnational motherhood, where Rai explains how mothers try to stay involved in their children's lives from a distance. A substantial portion of the research on international migration has largely focused on the push and pull factors of migration and the remittances they send back home. While these factors are important, migration is a multidimensional phenomenon that goes far beyond economic reasons. The absence of a parent, especially the mother, has a significant impact on the emotional well-being and overall development of the children. Therefore, the study strives to bridge the gap by examining the impact of migration not only on the lives of migrants but also on the families and children at home.

Methodology

The methodology for this present paper is based on a qualitative research approach, focusing on understanding the experiences of left-behind children in the context of maternal migration. Although the broader sampling design followed a multi-stage purposive sampling approach, for this paper, only one study location was selected from Kalimpong (Bong Busty). Bong Busty is divided into Upper, Middle and Lower Bong Busty, where half of the area is classified as a village and the other half as a municipality. This mixed settlement pattern reflects how migration emerges not only from rural areas but also from semi-urban spaces. This location was chosen purposively because most of the women migrants in the district were found to originate from Bong Busty, and a significant number of households with left-behind children were concentrated here. In addition to purposive selection, snowball sampling was also used. After visiting one migrant household, the researcher received references and directions to other households. To further support the identification of respondents, the village head and other local resource persons were consulted. The sample consisted of 50 respondents. The age group of the respondents consist of children between 7 and 18 years. These children were divided into two age groups. The first group, comprising children aged 7 to 12 years, included 20 respondents. The second group consisted of adolescents aged 13 to 18 years and included 30 respondents. Children under 0 to 5 years have been excluded, because they may not be able to respond, and their emotional and social development cannot be measured. Data was collected primarily through in-depth interviews, allowing respondents to share their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Structuration theory, developed by Anthony Giddens, is one of the prominent theories of contemporary sociology. The theory entails that social life is produced and reproduced by the interplay of both social structure and agency without giving primacy to either. Its basic premise is that an individual's actions are

constrained by social structure, but at the same time, they affect or constitute social structure. Applying this perspective to migration, the decision to migrate and work can be seen as a decision of agency to improve the family's economic conditions. However, the agency's action interfaces with the existing social structure, such as family and community norms, which often results in 'unintended consequences'-outcomes different from the expected ones. These outcomes can be seen as the impact of migration on the left-behind children. Two more theoretical perspectives help to understand the impact of migration on the left-behind children. First is the Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby (British Psychiatrist), where he explains that prolonged absence of parents, especially mothers, can disrupt the child's sense of security and affect their ability to form stable bonds. The second theory is the *Strain theory* by Robert K. Merton. When one or both parents migrate, children often experience a lack of parental supervision, and many of their social and emotional needs are unmet; they experience a sense of strain or frustration. This tension can lead them to adopt delinquent behaviour and sometimes get involved in juvenile crimes as coping strategies.

Findings

The impact of parental migration on left-behind children shows both positive and negative outcomes. The age of the children plays a crucial role in shaping how they experience and respond to this separation. The following subheadings present the findings identified in the study.

Education

One of the main reasons parents from Kalimpong migrate to work is the hope of providing better educational opportunities for their children. During my fieldwork, I observed that the actual outcomes were mixed. For some children (adolescents), especially those who are staying in a hostel, parental migration has resulted in positive academic performance, as the hostel environment provides structure, routine and regular study hours. But at the same time, the younger children (7 to 12 years) were not performing well in their studies, and they simply wanted to go home. Here we can see that migration does not necessarily lead to better academic outcomes. One of my respondents, Rhea, began to cry as soon as the interview started. She was only 8 years old, and from that, I got to know that she had been living in the hostel since class 1. All she expressed was to go home. Her experience illustrates that parental migration has brought unintended emotional cost. The lack of parental love and connection has affected her well-being, revealing the impact of migration on shaping the child's development.

Impact on social and mental health

A major consequence of parental migration for left-behind children concerns their mental and emotional well-being. The paper "Mother's migration and children's non-cognitive development" by Liu, H., et al. (2021) is a quantitative study that shows that the maternal migration particularly harms the child's non-cognitive

outcomes, such as emotional regulation and social skills. Out of 50 respondents, 38, a significant majority, reported experiencing emotional distress, and many expressed feelings of loneliness and abandonment, etc. Avinav, aged 15, shared his experience of staying with relatives while his mother had migrated for work and his father struggled with alcohol, which made it difficult to remain at home. Even though he was staying with his relatives, he constantly missed his home and mother, experiencing a sense of emotional void. He says, “Even though I was just a school-going boy, I had to take care of most of the household chores, and I miss my mother so much because back at home, I did not have to work so hard.” He does not have a cell phone, so communication with his mother was minimal, which made the emotional distance even more acute. He expresses that he always misses his mother and waits for the end of the year to meet his mother.

Another respondent, a 12-year-old girl staying in the hostel, once left the hostel without informing the warden. She tearfully explained that she just wanted to leave the hostel and return home. This incident illustrates the intense emotional and mental stress that she was going through, showing the longing for parental presence and the toll that migration has on young adolescents.

Juvenile Delinquency

According to a systematic review and analysis from many countries, parental migration is associated with psychological outcomes for left-behind children, including conduct problems and behavioural difficulties, which eventually lead to risk factors for delinquency (Fellmeth, G., Rose-Clarke, et al. 2018).

I interviewed two respondents; one was a 15-year-old boy. When I visited his home, his mother was working in Singapore, and his father struggled with alcohol. Over time, his father has also begun living with another woman, which meant he was rarely present at home. The boy lived mostly with his grandmother and younger sibling. The house stood unfinished, as most of his mother’s savings were spent in securing his legal defence. During our conversation, he was eager to clarify that the story circulating in the village was not entirely true. He explained that he and a girl were in love and had willingly eloped, but her family always disliked him, and that was the reason they filed a rape complaint against him. He said that his family lacked the resources and social support to defend him, and he was placed in custodial care. He had already dropped out of school, and after his release earns his living by driving a taxi despite being underage. Throughout the interview, it was clear that he had grown without guidance, emotional support and parental care. The neighbours also expressed that “he has always been like that”, reflecting a sense of resignation. This case is evidence of how parental migration and instability of the family, and lack of supervision, can lead children towards risky and delinquent acts.

Another respondent was 18 years old when I interviewed him, though the incident that led to his detainment had taken place a year earlier. At first, his parents hesitated to allow the interview, but after I explained to them

my research, they agreed. The boy himself was reluctant in the beginning and did not seem interested in talking. Since we belonged to the same locality, I began the conversation casually, asking about his well-being and bringing up his talent for playing guitar, something he is well-known for. Gradually, he began to open up. He shared that his relationship with his parents was always strained. His mother migrated for work in class 2 or 3, and although his father worked nearby, their bond remained distant. For most of his childhood and adolescence, he lived at his aunt's house and described a growing sense of resentment for his parents over the years. Eventually, he became involved in some activities that led to his arrest and spent a year in a correctional home.

Now back home, with his mother having returned from abroad, he still feels that the long year of separation has deeply affected his relationship with his mother. Although now they live together, share the daily routine, the emotional distance he felt as a child continues to linger, and the emotional void is still there; he is unsure how long it will take for it to heal. What troubles him further is the social stigma he faces; many people in the community see him only as a criminal, and as a result, he mostly stays at home. Even though he tries to initiate conversations with others, he feels that rebuilding his life will take time.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the multidimensional and contrary consequences of maternal migration on the left-behind children in the district of Kalimpong. Migration is commonly pursued as a means to enhance children's educational opportunities and prospects; the findings show that economic remittances do not necessarily ensure the emotional stability and well-being of the children. The in-depth interviews reveal that the absence of the mother creates a significant care deficit, particularly among the young children who experience separation anxiety, loneliness and emotional distress. Adolescents, on the other hand, face reduced parental supervision and weakened family relationships, which in some cases result in behavioural problems and stigma.

The narratives from Bong Busty clearly indicate that the migration reshapes the family life in ways that are not expected, resulting in long-term emotional and social consequences that cannot be easily repaired even when the migrant parent returns. By focusing on the experiences of the left-behind children, the study highlights the need to see migration beyond economic reasons and to recognise its impact on childhood care and family relationships.

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