Original Article

EFFECTS OF MALE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION ON MENTAL HEALTH OF WIVES LEFT BEHIND IN NEPAL

Dr Yagya Murti Bhurtyal[1, 2*], Dr Sharada Prasad Wasti[3]

[1]Director, Global Research and Education, Aberdeen, UK,[2]Assistant Professor, Nobel College, Kathmandu, affiliated to Pokhara University [3]Senior Research Fellow, University of Huddersfield, UK.
Corresponding author: Email: ym_bhurtyal@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

International male migration is very common and has been increasing significantly in recent days in Nepal.The increasing pattern of male migration has greatly impacted left-behind women. The aim of the study was to assess the effects of male international migration on the mental health (depression) of wives left behind in Nepal.

Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted with a total of 800 women (400 wives left behind and 400 wives of non-migrants) in the Chitwan district of Nepal.A systematic random sampling approach was employed for the recruitment of study respondents.Data were collected through a structured questionnaire with face-to-face interviews.Depression was measured by using a valid tool of depression screening questionnaire consisting of a 20-items scale. Data were managed in SPSS version 19 and analysed with a descriptive statistic followed bylogistic regression analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the Nepal Health Research Council and individual written consent was obtained prior to the interview.

Findings

The prevalence of depression in left-behind wives was 79 percent whereas only a 26.3 percent prevalence rate was found in the wives of non-migrants. There was a significant difference in

depression between left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants. The left-behind wives (OR = 10.57, p < 0.001) had around 11 times greater odds of having depressive symptoms compared to the wives of non-migrants. Logistic regression shows that theCaste/ethnicity (OR 1.15), level of education (OR 2.4), own named property (OR 1.7), and having children (OR 8.39) were identified as factors influencing depression in left-behind wives. However, the age of the wives (OR 0.46), level of education (OR 1.77), and employment status (OR 1.7) were found as factors that influence the depression in the wives of non-migrants. Findings between the left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants depict that only women's education (OR 2.94 vs 1.77) was found to be significantly associated with depression in both groups.

Conclusions

The increasing trend of male international migration has negative effects on left-behind wives regarding health and wellbeing. There should have targeted intervention mental health screening and counselling programs forboth non-migrant and left-behind wives for early detection and treatment. Government should plan psychosocial counsellingclinics and awareness-raising programmes particularlyto the higher male migrationcommunitiesfor early detection and treatment.

Keywords: International migration, depression, left-behind wives, Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a global phenomenon where around 272 million peoplewere classified as international migrants in 2019 among them more than half (164 million) were migrant workers[1]. Due to international labour migration, there weremonetary benefits to migrants, their families, and the country but numerous unfavourable effects including adverse health outcomes ofboth migrants and their left-behind families were well reported in the global literature[2].Past studies in China[3], Mexico[4],Pakistan[5]and Sri Lanka[2] pointed out that left-behind wives are suffering from physical and mental health problems[6]. Similarly study in Iran also revealed that wives of migrating husbands had a higher level of mental health problems relative to those in non-migrant

relationships[7]. Nepal has also a long history of international labourmigration, and it has significantly increased over the years. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2016) nearly half (47%) of the households surveyed reported at least one person who migrated from the household in the last 10 years either internal or international destinations [8]. There are more international migrants in the world today than ever before and migration is an increasingly important contributing factor to Nepal's economy and around one-third (26.9%) of Nepal's gross domestic product through remittance [9]. Many Nepalese migrants choose to live abroad to improve the lives of their immediate and left-behind families.

Although there is limited research in wives of left-behind who usually report decreased health and well-being compared to non-migrant wives[6]. A study conducted in Sri Lanka shows that spouses of international migrant workers had common mental disorders issues[2]. Similarly, a study in Nepal also shows that migration resulted in negative impacts such as feeling loneliness due to separation, and experience of conflicting marital relations and termination of pregnancy, and inability to conceive a baby[10].Similarly, sociological research carried out in the Eastern part of Nepal also revealed that increased workload triggered mental tension in migrant wives[11].Although there is no research exists on the effects of male international migration on wives left behind mental ill healthparticularly depression in Nepal which we hypothesised that depression among wives of left behindhas higher than the non-migrant wives in Nepal. Therefore, this study was designed to assess the effects of male international migration on the mental health of wives left behind in Nepal. Within mental health, only the depression is reported in this article. The findings of this study can provide a new direction for migration research and perhaps be important for clinicians, researchers and policy makers as well as NGOs/INGOs who works in health and wellbeing issues among migrant workers and their left behind families where requires great multi-disciplinary intervention strategies to address the effects of migration on those left behind wives.

METHODS

This was part of the bigger study and data were collected over 3 years (2011-2014) with a total of 800 women (400 wives left behind and 400 wives of non-migrants)in one of the municipalities of Chitwan district. The sample size was determined as per the Lwanga and Lemeshow[12] formula for two separate migrants and non-migrants wives.

$$N = \frac{t^2 * p(1-p)}{d^2}$$

Where:

N = Required Sample size

t = Confidence level at 95% (Standard value of 1.96)

p = estimated prevalence of depression on left-behind wives (50%)

d = desired level of precision (5%)

$N = \frac{1.96^2 * 0.5\ (1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = 384$

Moreover,a 5% nonresponse rate was also added and a total of 400 for migrants and a same number of non-migrant wives were added and a total 800 sample size was determined. This study site was purposively selected based on the higher number of male migrants' community. Data was collected in systematic random sampling approaches wherethe field researcher firstly developed alist of all eligible households for migrant and non-migrant separately. Next, households were systematically selected (i.e. every third household) from the list and approached for an interview. A systematic random sampling approach was employed for the recruitment. All questions were adapted for the Nepali context which ensures that they are, to a degree, valid and reliable[13]. Final data collection tools were pre-tested prior to final field survey. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire with face-to-face interviews administered by the researcher.Ethical approval was obtained from the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) and before interviewsindividual writtenconsent was obtained from all respondents and no identifiers were recorded in the electronic dataset to maintain anonymity. Depression was measured by using a valid toolof depression screening questionnaire consisting of a 20-items scale and depression is classified as per the respondents who scored ≥ 16 as suggested by Radloff (1977)[14]. Datawere analysed with a descriptive statistic to identify respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and followed the analytical analysis. A chi-squared test for two independent samples for each category was performed whether there was any difference between the left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants for depression in the same category of variables. For this calculation, the wives of the non-migrant group were taken as a reference categoryand all the

significant variables were performed the logistic regression analysis. Logistic regression analysis was carried out to see the significant association between the variables. Independent variables were considered significant at a p-value of 0.05 or less.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 shows that the wives of the migrants were found younger (31.1 years) than the wives of non-migrants (33.4 years). Hindu religion was dominant in both migrant (67.3%) and non-migrant wives (72.0%). More than half (51.3%) of left-behind wives completed secondary level or higher education as compared to wives of non-migrants (42.5%). Around half (43%) of the wives of non-migrants were employed which is about six percent higher than the left-behind wives (36.0%). More than one-third (36%) of the wives left behind and 42.5 percent of the wives of non-migrant had engaged in income-related activities respectively. The majority (92.5%) of women in both households had at least one child. About 40 percent of the wives of non-migrants had three or more children compared to 32.1 percent of left-behind wives. About three-fourth (74%) of households were headed by females in migrant households whereas only 19 percent of non-migrant households. Around one-third (33%) of migrant households contained three or fewer family members which was about three times higher than non-migrant households (Table 1).

Prevalence of depression among the left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants

The overall prevalence of depression found 52.6 percent whereas left-behind wives only was 79 percent and 26.3 percent in the wives of non-migrants. The left-behind wives (OR = 10.57, $p < 0.001$) had around 11 times greater odds of having depressive symptoms compared to the wives of non-migrants. This result indicated that the women whose husbands had migrated abroad were more likely to be depressed as compared to the women who were living with their husbands and the prevalence of depression was also higher in the left-behind wives than in the wives of non-migrants (Table 2).

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Variables		Total		Migrant husband wives		Non-migrant wives		χ^2	p
		N= 800	%	N= 400	%	N= 400	%		
Age	18-29 years	300	37.5	181	45.3	119	29.8	29.89** (2df)	<0.001
	30-39 years	350	43.8	169	42.3	181	45.3		
	40-49 years	150	18.8	50	12.5	100	25.0		
	Mean year (SD)	32.5 (7.33)		31.1 (6.69)		33.4 (7.69)			
Religion	Hindu	557	69.6	269	67.3	288	72.0	2.17 (2df)	0.338
	Buddhist	205	25.6	110	27.5	95	23.7		
	Other	38	4.8	21	5.3	17	4.3		
Caste	Brahman/ Chhetri	350	43.8	158	39.5	192	48.0	17.06** (2df)	<0.001
	Janajati	348	43.5	202	50.5	146	36.5		
	Other	102	12.7	40	10.0	62	15.5		
Education	No education	80	10.0	34	8.5	46	11.5	11.02* (3df)	0.012
	Primary	345	43.1	161	40.3	184	46.0		

Variables		Total		Migrant husband wives		Non-migrant wives		χ^2	p
		N= 800	%	N= 400	%	N= 400	%		
	Secondary	259	32.4	151	37.8	108	27.0		
	Above SLC	116	14.5	54	13.5	62	15.5		
Employment	Employed	315	39.4	144	36.0	171	42.7	3.27 (1df)	0.071
	Not employed	485	60.4	256	64.0	229	57.3		
Occupation	Housewives	485	60.4	256	64.0	229	57.3	6.62 (3df)	0.085
	Agriculture	177	22.1	88	22.0	89	22.3		
	Service/job	60	7.5	23	5.8	37	9.3		
	Business	78	9.8	33	8.3	45	11.3		
Own named properties	Yes	178	22.3	107	26.8	71	17.8	9.37* (1df)	0.002
	No	622	77.8	293	73.3	329	82.3		
Number of children	No Children	60	7.5	30	7.5	30	7.5	6.33 (3df)	0.097
	1-2 Children	454	56.8	242	60.5	212	53.0		
	3-4 Children	255	31.9	117	29.3	138	34.5		

Variables		Total		Migrant husband wives		Non-migrant wives		χ^2	p
		N= 800	%	N= 400	%	N= 400	%		
	5+ Children	31	3.9	11	2.8	20	5.0		
Household head gender	Female	372	46.5	296	74.0	76	19.0	241.0 (1df)	<0.001
	Male	428	53.5	104	26.0	324	81.0		
Family type	Nuclear	470	58.8	207	51.8	263	65.7	15.60 (1df)	<0.001
	Extended	330	41.2	193	48.2	137	34.3		
Number of family members	1-3	178	22.3	130	32.5	48	12.0	51.83 (2 df)	<0.001
	4-6	456	57.0	188	47.0	268	67.0		
	7+	166	20.8	82	20.5	84	21.0		

Note: * - Significant at 5% and ** - Significant at 1% Table 2: Prevalence of depression between the left-behind and the wives of non-migrants

Category	Mean depression score (SD)	Depressed		Not-depressed		OR (95% CI)	P
		N	%	N	%		
Wives of non-migrants	11.9 (6.6)	105	26.3	295	73.7	1	
Left-behind wives	20.3 (5.5)	316	79.0	84	21.0	10.57 (7.6 to 14.7)	<0.001
Total	16.1 (7.4)	421	52.6	379	47.4		

Association between depression and socio-demographic related factors among leftbehind wives and wives of non-migrants

Table 3 shows that Caste/ethnicity (OR 1.15), level of education (OR 2.4), own named property (OR 1.7), and having children (OR 8.39) were identified as associated factors for depression in left-behind wives. However, the age of the wives (OR 0.46), level of education (OR 1.77), and employment status (OR 1.7) were found to be significantly associated with depression in the wives of non-migrants. Findings between the left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants depict that only women's education (OR 2.94 vs 1.77) was found to be significantly associated with depression in both groups. Women with no education in both groups were more likely to be depressed than the women with some education. For wives of non-migrants, older wives were more likely to be depressed than the younger ones but in the case of wives left behind, younger wives had higher odds of depression than the older ones (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Findings indicated that the women whose husbands had migrated abroad were more likely to be depressed as compared to the women who were living with their husbands and the prevalence of depression was also higher (79%) in the left-behind wives than in the wives of non-migrants (26.3%). The prevalence of depression on left-behind wives was higher than the findings of Mexico[4] and Pakistan[15]studieswho had used the same tools and cut-off points. Thisstudy had excluded internal migration and the difference in the results between earlier studies may be due to the distance and duration of migration and frequency of visits to the family. Most of the migrants from Nepal went to Gulf countries, Malaysia and other countries for employment purposes[16]which countries are quite far from home and migrants did not visit their families for a long period of time.

Findings shows that socio-demographic characteristics of the study respondents found significant contributing factors for depression among the left-behind wives such ascaste/ethnicity, level of education, employment status and having children than the wives of non-migrants.

Table 3: Logistic regression Analysis between left-behind wives and wives of non-migrants on depression with socio-demographic characteristics

Predictor variables	Reference category	Total women	Left-behind wives	Wives of non-migrants
		adj. OR	adj. OR	adj. OR
Migration status of husband				
Left-behind wives	Wives of non-migrants	10.57***		
Age				
32 years and below	Above 32	1.25	1.32	0.46**
Religion				
Other	Hindu	1.24	1.38	0.98
Caste/ethnicity				
Lower caste	Upper caste	1.15**	1.57*	1.22
Education				
Illiterate	Literate	1.34	2.94*	1.77*
Employment				
Employed	Unemployed	1.07	1.02	1.70**
Own named property				
No	Yes	0.99	1.70**	1.16
Having children				
No	Yes	1.38	8.39**	0.86
Household head				
Male	Female	0.28***	1.12	0.67
Family type				
Nuclear	Extended	0.68**	1.09	0.75
Family members				
More than 5	5 or less	1.06	1.06	1.66**

: Significant at 10%; **: Significant at 5% and *: Significant at 1%; adj.: adjusted*

When comparing the results between the left-behind wives and the wives of non-migrants, only women's education was found to be significantly associated with depression in both groups. Women with no education in both groups were more likely to be depressed than the women with some education.For wives of non-migrants, older wives were more likely to be depressed than the younger ones but in the case of wives left behind, younger wives had higher odds of depression than the older ones. Similar findings also reported in the earlier studies conducted in elsewhere[4 6 17].Lower caste women left behind who find such social discrimination are more likely to be depressed in the absence of their husbands[18 19].

This study found that left-behind wives who had their own name property and children were less likely to be depressed than the left-behind wives with no property in their own name and no children. Similar findings was also reported in a recent study conducted in Nepal that women with households with lower wealth status report poorer subjective health and happiness[20]. However, there was evidence of the positive significant association of caste and education with the depression in left-behind wives. These factors are likely to be a marker for depression in the wives left behind[6].

The left-behind wives who had an illiterate household head (OR: 2.33, p = 0.048) were more likely to be depressed than the left-behind wives who were living with literate household heads. This finding is supported by a study in Iran suggesting that the household head's education is negatively associated with depression in women where the study shows that more than two-thirds (67%) of women were depressed in the illiterate household head [17] [21]. The possible explanation might be that left-behind wives cannot experience any freedom and their lives are controlled by the household head and the illiterate household heads are more traditional and conservative in nature and not supportive of left-behind wives in the absence of their husbands.

This study revealed that childless women are more likely to be depressed than women with children. Similar findings were also reported in India[22] that childless women feel loneliness and stress and are even more depressed when living separated from their husbands[23]. This may be so in most of the communities in Nepal, women who did not have children are treated poorly and often abused verbally by family members in the absence of their husbands[24]. Social isolation results in low social help and support given to women which can create social stress which perhaps leads to depression[25].

Conclusions

Husband's international migration has a negative effect on the mental health of the left-behind wives. Much higher prevalence of depression was found in left-behind wives than in the wives of non-migrants. This finding indicates that left-behind wives are at high risk of being depressed as a result of their husband's migration and also indicated that there are mental health challenges among women with migrant husbands in Nepal. Individual factors such as caste/ethnicity, having children, and the property were associated significantly as contributing to depression in left-behind wives. The burden of depression in left-behind wives may not only be the separation from

their husbands and the burden of responsibility but is equally associated with their exposure to poor socio-cultural and economic conditions after the husband's migration. The findings of this study also revealed that left-behind wives are depressed due to separation arising from the husbands' migration. Thus, the intervention should be targeted at the migrants and encourage them to visit their homes regularly which could help to reduce depression in the left-behind wives. Moreover, the government should have a long-term plan to create a job market in Nepal which would potentially reduce international migration to seek employment that may help to reduce the health and wellbeing issues amongthose left behind families.

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