

India: What Happens to the Wives of Male Migrant Workers, Who Run Entire Households in Villages?

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It is the women who stay behind in the villages who sustain migration by supporting their men. We must not ignore them.

On March 24, prime minister Narendra Modi announced a complete lockdown of the country for 21 days to contain the spread of novel coronavirus. All transport operations were grounded and non-essential services shut overnight. This sudden nationwide lockdown brought the nation of over a billion people to its knees but one particular group has clearly been most severely hit: India's internal migrants.

Soon after the announcement, distressing reports emerged that many migrants were stranded in cities without income and food.

Many started to head home on foot, with some arduously walking hundreds of kilometres to return to their native places without adequate food and water along the way; some even faced police brutalities for no fault of their own.

The panic surrounding the spread of the coronavirus had already set in before the nationwide lockdown. States such as Maharashtra and Kerala, which are worst affected by the virus and also attract a large number of migrants, had already implemented strict lockdown measures. As livelihoods dwindled, [migrants crowded trains](#) to return home.

There are nearly 100 million internal migrants in India, and not all had the choice to return home.

Most rural-urban migrants work in the unorganised sector; they have precarious lives and livelihoods, and they subsist in cities and support their families in villages from savings their meagre everyday earnings allow.

Many had the information but chose to stay for another day of wage as they faced the cruel choice of dying from [hunger before coronavirus](#) could get them.

As news spread on the plight of stranded migrants, the Central government and several state governments have initiated actions to provide them with basic necessities such as food, shelter, sanitation. Many civil society groups, such as Aajeevika, are also working on the ground to help the migrants in crisis. These are welcome steps indeed.

Yet, there is also another group of citizens in potentially more severe crisis that needs urgent help but is conspicuously absent in current discussions on lockdown-induced migration crisis.

It is the 'left-behind wives' of migrants, who stay behind in villages and who depend on their

husbands' remittances to run their families. My [field research](#) in high labour outmigration state of Bihar shows the important role migrants' remittances play in sustaining rural families headed by women.

These are *de facto* women-headed households where women assume the role of household heads in the absence of men. With their men stranded and livelihoods disrupted, these women need support in these troubling times as much migrants.

Bihar is not alone and this crisis looms large across rural India. In large parts of rural India, labour migration is predominantly undertaken by single men while the women stay behind to manage their families and farms.

As important [research](#) by Chinmay Tumbe of IIM-Ahmedabad shows, male migration is prevalent in regions covering over 200 million people, including places as diverse as coastal Maharashtra to mountainous Uttarakhand. Strikingly, this migration pattern has persisted for over 100 years.

There are two key reasons for this male-only pattern of migration. First, socio-cultural norms restrict the mobility of women to distant urban areas. As dutiful wives, mothers, daughter-in-laws, they are expected to stay in the village and manage their rural households.

Second, where social norms allow migrants to bring their wives to cities, financial constraints preclude realistic opportunities. Most migrants in urban informal sector earn low wages and share cheap accommodation with fellow workers; they cannot afford to have separate accommodation to live with families. Besides, high costs of healthcare and children's education in cities also prohibit family migration, especially among communities where women face cultural restrictions on wage work.

Enduring prolonged physical and emotional separation from their men, women also suffer from several gender-based vulnerabilities in villages.

My [primary research](#) in rural Bihar on migration and food security documented that women-headed households where men were absent due to migration were more vulnerable to food insecurity than the households headed by men.

This is despite the fact that women prioritised food and used household cash and other resources on food security more judiciously than men. This disadvantage arose largely because of the entrenched gender inequalities women-headed households faced.

One important reason for this is that women often face greater difficulties in accessing government-run social protection services such as PDS food rations, important source of food security in rural India. My field research shows that migration and gender coalesce to produce disadvantage for women-headed migrant households.

This occurs through two ways.

First, absence of men and social norms often restricting the participation of women in the affairs outside the household result in women who stay behind finding it hard to register their claims over their social protection entitlements; those who try are often unheard and manipulated.

Second, the local authorities in-charge of administering the safety nets often regard households with migrant members as having steady income streams, and thus, consider them ineligible for social protection benefits.

It is under such circumstances of added gender-based vulnerabilities that remittances come to their rescue. However, with migration-based livelihoods in disarray for uncertain time, women-headed households will be particularly pressed to fend for themselves.

At the global level, there are concerns that COVID-19 poses [intensified risks for women and girls](#), including gender-based violence. The women who stay back in rural India already straddle an added burden of productive and reproductive responsibilities. This crisis will likely intensify their care work, and financial stress will further aggravate their situation.

At the time of writing, media reports showed that states such as Odisha, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh are arranging transport for stranded migrants to return home. But given the risk of coronavirus spread, it is likely that these migrants will be kept in temporary shelters before they are allowed to return home.

Some states, such as Gujarat, have already put in place [strict restrictions](#) on migrants' return travel to their villages, and arranged free food and accommodation. This is a wise move, not least because it will reduce the risk of women getting infected. But all this also means it will be a while before women in villages can expect help from their men. They need social protection to help them avert this crisis.

Rise in food insecurity is a key immediate concern. One immediate measure that state governments can and should take is to provide free food rations to all such women-headed households to prevent hunger among them. In particular, poor states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh that have high labour outmigration prevalence, much of which involves male migration, should immediately implement this. Vast PDS infrastructure already exists to serve this goal.

Local gram panchayat leaders should be roped in. These leaders possess knowledge on livelihood profiles of all households in their areas and know the migrant households headed by women. Moreover, state governments should also provide cash payments to such households. Many of these households will likely have NREGS job cards and that information should be used to provide them cash support. These steps can provide immediate relief and reduce the gender-based vulnerabilities of such women-headed migrant households.

Indian cities and towns generate [over 70% of country's GDP](#), and migrant labour plays a key constructive role in this. India's rural migrants build our cities and sustain our urban lives. We must protect them.

But it is the women left-behind who sustain migration by supporting their men. We must not ignore them, and help them in this time of crisis. We owe it to them.

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