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Changing Gender Roles through Remittances: A Sociological Analysis of Left-Behind Families in District Poonch

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sociological impact of international labor migration and remittances on changing gender roles within left-behind families in District Poonch, Kashmir. In a traditionally patriarchal society where men have long been the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, the migration of male family members for employment has shifted household responsibilities toward women. This research aims to understand how remittances, as both economic and symbolic resources, influence women's roles, autonomy, and participation in family and community life.

Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 left-behind women whose husbands or close male relatives were working abroad. Data were analyzed thematically to explore patterns of role transformation, emotional burden, and social perception. The findings reveal that while remittances improve household living standards and empower women in areas such as financial management, children's education, and healthcare decision-making, these changes are often accompanied by increased emotional stress, overwork, and persistent social control by in-laws and extended families.

Current study highlights a complex transformation: gender roles are shifting, but not in a linear or liberating way for all women. Many women are navigating a "bargain with patriarchy," where their newfound authority exists within traditional boundaries. The research contributes to the broader literature on migration, gender, and social change, emphasizing that remittances are not merely economic tools but also powerful agents of sociocultural transformation.

The study concludes with policy recommendations to support left-behind women through capacity-building programs, gender-sensitive financial services, and greater recognition of their evolving roles. These insights are valuable for sociologists, policymakers, NGOs, and development practitioners working in the fields of gender, migration, and community development.

Keywords: Remittances, Gender Roles, Left-Behind Families, Migration, Women Empowerment, Sociology

INTRODUCTION

Migration and remittances have become defining features of many developing societies, including Pakistan and particularly Kashmir, where a significant portion of the population depends on earnings sent home by family members working abroad. These financial influxes not

only support household consumption but also have great impact on social structures, cultural norms, and gender dynamics within communities (World Bank, 2019).

Traditionally, in patriarchal societies like those found in Kashmir, gender roles have been clearly and well-defined: men are expected to be breadwinners, and women are largely responsible to caregiving and domestic tasks (Shirazi, 2012). Being a breadwinner, when men migrate for employment, women are left behind to manage different household activities, make important decisions, handle finances, socialize the children, and even participate in community matters. This shift from indoor tasks to outdoor tasks, challenges existing gender norms and leads to the redefinition of women's roles within the family and society (Ghumman & Gulzar, 2015).

Remittances empower women in different and complex ways. The migration of male members increases women's workload and emotional burden, while on other side, it also creates new spaces for female agency, independence, and decision-making (Sadaqat & Sheikh, 2011). For instance, women may gain control over remittance usage, participate in local markets, or engage in educational and health-related decisions that were previously controlled by male members (Arif, 2009). This process reflects a gradual shift from traditional gender hierarchies to more flexible role distributions in many remittance-receiving households.

However, the flow of these changes are not always linear or uniform. In many cases, women's empowerment remains symbolic or temporary, especially if social control by in-laws or extended family structures remains strong (Khan & Ali, 2014). Furthermore, the return of migrant men, can sometimes reverse the shifts in gender roles, leading to renewed tension or reassertion of patriarchal authority (Hadi, 2001). Thus, the gendered consequences of migration and remittances are context-dependent, shaped by cultural norms, household dynamics, and local power structures.

District Poonch in Kashmir is a relevant case for this sociological inquiry. It has a high rate of labor migration, especially to the Gulf countries and the United Kingdom. In this region, many households rely on remittances as their primary source of income, and women are responsible for their basic as well as new roles in these communities due to the absence of male family members. However, there is limited empirical research on how this shift influences gender identities, social relations, and household decision-making in the Poonch context.

This study aims to examine the changing gender roles within left-behind families in District Poonch, using a sociological lens. It seeks to understand whether and how remittance-driven migration leads to transformation in gender norms, female empowerment, and family dynamics. By focusing on the lived experiences of left-behind women, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender, migration, and development in South Asia. It also offers insights into how economic processes like remittances can interact with local cultural systems to produce social change — or reinforce existing inequalities.

Purpose and Urgency of the Study

The key purpose of recent study is to explore how international labor migration and the inflow of remittances play important role in transforming gender roles within left-behind families in District Poonch, Kashmir. In societies like Kashmir, according to traditional gender norms men are assigned the role of breadwinner and women the role of caregiver, the migration of men and the resulting economic dependency on remittances create a new social dynamic that creates curiosity to sociological investigation. The purpose of current study is to understand how these changes affect women's authority, responsibilities, and autonomy in the household as well as in community.

The demand of this study stems from the rapid increase in labor migration from Pakistan, especially from Kashmir, over the past two decades. According to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (2020), thousands of men from Kashmir migrate annually to the Gulf and other countries for work, leaving behind women and children. While remittances have become a support for these families, their social impact remains neglected and under-researched, particularly from a gender perspective in rural and semi-urban areas.

Additionally, there is a growing need to highlight and document the lived experiences of left-behind women, who also experience silent emotional, physical, and social transformations. These women are increasingly becoming decision-makers and caregivers in the absence of male authority, yet continue to operate within deeply patriarchal social structures. The experiences of such women hold critical importance in understanding the changing patterns of family life, gender relations, and economic resilience in migration-affected communities. The need of current study is also because of the policy gap: while remittances are celebrated in economic terms by governments and development agencies, their sociological consequences especially gendered ones are often ignored. As Pakistan develops policies to support overseas workers and their families, it is vital that these policies are informed by ground-level gender-sensitive research.

Consequently, this study not only fills a scholarly gap in the field of migration and gender studies, but also provides practical insights for NGOs, community leaders, and policymakers working to empower left-behind women in Kashmir and similar socio-cultural settings.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the structural changes in family roles resulting from international migration and the inflow of remittances.
2. To examine the transformation of traditional gender roles within left-behind households in a rural and semi-urban cultural setting.
3. To explore the relationship between economic dependency on remittances and the redistribution of power and responsibility within the family unit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration and the resulting flow of remittances have become important topics in the fields of economics and development studies; however, over the past two decades, sociologists have

increasingly turned their attention toward understanding the social and cultural consequences of remittance-dependent households, particularly in the Global South, including Pakistan.

Remittances as emotional and financial flow play a critical role in transforming household structures and social relations in migrant-sending regions. According to Arif (2009), households that receive regular remittances often experience improved living standards, better access to education, and improved health outcomes. However, these economic gains are accompanied by social costs, particularly when it comes to changes in family life.

Migration creates a transnational family, where one or more members of the household live and work abroad, while the rest stay behind, maintaining emotional, financial, and social ties across borders (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This separation, while economically beneficial, causes major changes in intra-household decision-making, parenting roles, and emotional dynamics.

One of the most significant sociological consequences of male labor migration is the shift in traditional gender roles. In traditional patriarchal societies like Pakistan, men are conventionally responsible as providers, while women manage the home. However, male outmigration challenges this structure.

According to Sadaqat and Sheikh (2011), the migration of men drove women into leadership roles within the household. Women are expected to manage and control finances, make decisions regarding children's education and health, and when needed, deal with community matters. This modification results in a partial re-negotiation of gender roles and norms, especially in rural or conservative areas where women previously had limited decision-making power.

Ghumman and Gulzar (2015) found that in District Jhelum, left-behind women reported greater self-rule in daily household affairs, increased respect from in-laws, and more frequent participation in community-level events. However, this empowerment was not uniform; in many cases, the remittance-sending husband continued to exert control remotely through phone calls and instructions, thus maintaining patriarchal authority from abroad.

While remittances create opportunities for women's empowerment, this empowerment is often situational, temporary, and conditional. Hadi (2001), in his research on rural Bangladesh, argued that although women gained decision-making roles during their husbands' absence, this autonomy was often withdrawn upon the husband's return. Similarly, Khan and Ali (2014) pointed out that the symbolic empowerment of women is often tolerated only when it does not threaten existing patriarchal norms.

In Pakistan, extended family systems especially the presence of mothers-in-law or elder male relatives—can restrict women's agency even in the absence of their husbands. Shirazi (2012) explains that in many joint families, control over remittances may shift to elders, leaving the wife with responsibilities but little financial authority.

This phenomenon point out a complex relationship between migration, remittances, and gender roles: women may gain responsibilities but not always real authority.

Cultural norms in rural areas, especially in Kashmir, often act as barriers to long-term gender role transformation. Even when women take on new roles, community perceptions and honor-based restrictions may prevent them from exercising these roles openly.

Arif (2009) notes that in Kashmir and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, many women feel empowered within the home but are still limited from working outside such as attending public meetings, or participating in political or community-level leadership. This shows that empowerment is mostly domestic, and does not necessarily translate to wider social or public empowerment.

Although several studies have examined the impact of remittances on gender roles in Pakistan and South Asia, there is limited qualitative research on this topic in the context of Kashmir, particularly District Poonch. Most existing studies focus on urban areas or provinces like Punjab and Sindh. As migration from Kashmir—especially to the UK and Gulf countries—is historically high, there is a pressing need to examine how remittances shape social structures and gendered experiences in this unique socio-cultural context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary sociological framework that incorporates theories of gender roles, feminist thought, transnationalism, and social structure. These theories help in understanding the complex and context-specific ways in which remittances influence gender dynamics within left-behind families in patriarchal societies like Pakistan particularly in District Poonch, Kashmir.

Gender Role Theory suggests that society prescribes specific behaviors, responsibilities, and expectations to individuals based on their gender. In traditional South Asian cultures, men are assigned the role of the provider, while women are expected to manage the home and raise children. However, international migration of male family members interrupts these traditional patterns, placing women in new roles such as managing finances, making decisions, and even dealing with community affairs along with domestic responsibilities (Shirazi, 2012). The theory provides a lens to examine how women adapt to their husbands' absence, and whether these changes are permanent or situational.

Feminist theory, particularly liberal feminism, argues for women's equality through access to education, employment, and financial autonomy. In contrast, post-structural feminism focuses on how power and gender are constructed through discourse and everyday practices. In the context of remittance-receiving families, women's roles often shift from being passive dependents to active decision-makers though often within cultural and patriarchal limits. This theory helps analyze the extent of women's empowerment, the symbolic vs. practical autonomy they experience, and the power negotiations within families and communities.

The Theory of Transnationalism explains how migrants and their families maintain active social, emotional, and economic ties across borders. Even though men are physically absent, they continue to exert influence through regular communication and control over remittances. This theory helps explore how left-behind women's roles evolve in a transnational household, how

remote control by migrant men affects women's autonomy, and whether female empowerment is real or supervised.

According to Structural Functionalism, society functions as a system in which various parts (institutions, roles, norms) maintain equilibrium. Traditionally, the family operates with distinct instrumental roles (assigned to men) and expressive roles (assigned to women). Male migration disrupts this balance, leading women to take over both roles. This theory explains how families adapt structurally in the absence of men, the role conflict women experience while managing dual responsibilities, and the stress or support mechanisms within extended families.

Social Exchange Theory explains social behavior in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. In the case of remittance-receiving families, women may perceive their increased responsibilities and restricted autonomy as acceptable trade-offs in exchange for economic stability. This theory helps in understanding how women weigh emotional and social costs of separation, why some women accept limited empowerment, and how compliance vs. resistance is shaped by perceived gains.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretative paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring the subjective meanings, experiences, and perceptions of left-behind women (Creswell, 2014). The research aimed to examine how international remittances had great impact on gender roles especially left-behind women, in District Poonch, Kashmir, by focusing on the lived experiences of women whose male family members had migrated abroad for work.

A qualitative exploratory approach was employed to investigate the social and cultural implications of migration and remittances on gender roles. This research design was selected because it allowed the researcher to understand complex, context-specific phenomena in natural settings without imposing predetermined categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The focus remained on understanding lived realities, not generating generalization of statistics.

The research was conducted in District Poonch, Kashmir, which has a historically high rate of labor migration to the Gulf and the UK. The area was selected purposive due to its rich context of transnational family life, traditional gender norms, and heavy dependence on remittances.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the following criteria:

- Women whose husbands or male family heads were working abroad for at least 12 months.
- Belonging to households receiving regular international remittances.
- Actively involved in household decision-making in the absence of male guardians.

A total of 18 women from different socio-economic backgrounds were interviewed from four villages in District Poonch. The sampling aimed to ensure variation in age, education level, and marital status, following the guidance of Patton (2002) on maximum variation sampling.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility while keeping the conversation focused. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions on:

- Gender roles before and after migration,
- Remittance management and financial decision-making,
- Changes in authority, respect, and autonomy,
- Emotional and social effects of male absence.

The interviews were conducted in Urdu and Pahari, audio recorded (with consent), and later transcribed for analysis. Interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allow participants to share rich narratives in their own words.

Brief participant observations were made during visits to homes and community spaces. Field notes were recorded to capture non-verbal cues, living conditions, family dynamics, and participant expressions.

The collected data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The process involved:

1. Reading transcripts multiple times for familiarization,
2. Generating initial codes inductively,
3. Grouping codes into meaningful themes,
4. Reviewing and defining the final themes.

Manual coding was used, as the sample size was manageable. Key emerging themes included:

- “Invisible Leadership” of women,
- Emotional burden vs. autonomy,
- Remote control from abroad,
- Role conflicts and negotiation within joint families.

The inductive approach allowed for themes to emerge directly from the participants’ narratives rather than being imposed beforehand.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with left-behind women in District Poonch, Kashmir, revealed four major themes, each demonstrating how gender roles have shifted due to male migration and regular inflow of remittances. While remittances increased women’s autonomy in some domains, they also intensified their emotional and social burdens.

1. Increased Financial Responsibility and Decision-Making Power

A majority of the respondents reported that they had assumed new financial responsibilities, including managing monthly expenses, dealing with banks, and deciding on children's educational needs.

One 29-year-old participant said:

“My husband used to take care of everything. But since he went to Saudi Arabia, I learned to pay utility bills, buy ration, and manage our children’s school fees.”

Another woman explained: “When I went to the bank for the first time, I was very scared. Now I go every month, collect money, and even help my neighbors who don’t know how to fill forms.”

These changes signify a shift in traditional gender roles, where men had exclusive control over finances (Kabeer, 2000). While this newfound responsibility empowered women, it was not without limitations.

A third woman reflected: “I control the money now, but still, for any big expense like buying a cow or repairing the house, I ask my husband first. He has to approve it.”

This shows that while women were participating more actively in financial decisions, final authority often remained with the absent male, aligning with Connell’s (1987) notion of hegemonic masculinity.

2. Role Expansion and the Burden of Dual Responsibilities

Many respondents reported feeling overwhelmed by the dual role of caregiving and household management, especially in the absence of male support.

A 36-year-old mother of three said:

“In the morning I prepare the kids for school, then I go to the market, then back home to cook and clean. There is no time for rest.”

A widow whose son works abroad shared:

“Earlier, my son used to deal with all outside matters. Now I have to talk to the electrician, the plumber, even the landlord. It’s exhausting.”

Another participant remarked:

“Even if I am unwell, I have to carry on. There’s no one else to manage things. Sometimes I cry at night because it gets too much.”

These lived realities reflect Hochschild’s (1989) second shift where women carry both unpaid household labor and now, financial and managerial responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, some women took pride in their self-sufficiency:

“Now I feel more confident. I don’t wait for anyone. I’ve learned to make my own decisions.”

This duality empowerment mixed with emotional fatigue captures the complexity of changing gender roles under migration.

3. Negotiating Authority within Extended Families

The transition to decision-making roles was not smooth for all. In joint family structures, many women faced resistance from in-laws or elder relatives.

One woman described:

“My father-in-law still treats me like I’m dependent. Even though I handle all expenses, he doesn’t consult me in family matters.”

Another said: “I get money from my husband directly, but my brother-in-law questions my every move. If I buy something expensive, they say I’m wasting money.”

These experiences show the persistence of symbolic male dominance (Bourdieu, 1991), where women’s control over resources does not always translate into social recognition or power within the household.

Yet some women managed to assert their influence:

“At first my mother-in-law didn’t trust me. But when she saw I was managing well, she started involving me in family decisions.”

This reflects gradual renegotiation of power dynamics in the family, not a revolution, but subtle shifts in daily practice (Giddens, 1984).

4. Changing Social Identity and Community Status

Remittances were not just financial; they became a symbol of social prestige. Many women experienced higher status in the community due to their association with a “foreign income.”

A woman stated:

“People respect me now. They say my husband is abroad and I get dollars. Some even come to me for help with school fees or advice.”

Another shared:

“Earlier I was just a housewife. Now I attend village meetings, even school functions, because people think I know more.”

These experiences align with Levitt & Lamba-Nieves’ (2011) idea of social remittances non-financial changes that alter values, behavior, and status.

However, this came with challenges too. One woman said:

“Some women are jealous. They spread rumors if I wear good clothes or speak confidently. They say I have changed.”

Such reactions reflect the double standards women face when navigating traditional norms while trying to exercise new forms of power (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The findings demonstrate that remittances reshape gender dynamics in complex and contradictory ways. Women experience both:

- Greater independence in financial and domestic matters,
- And new social pressures from family and community.

This supports the idea of bargaining with patriarchy(Kandiyoti, 1988), where women negotiate within gendered constraints rather than directly opposing them.

While some participants embraced the change, others continued to operate under the shadow of male authority, even from afar.

Thus, remittances function not only as economic tools but also as agents of sociocultural transformation, altering how gender, power, and family are practiced in rural AJK.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the sociological impact of remittances on gender roles within left-behind families in District Poonch, Kashmir. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research revealed that international labor migration and the inflow of remittances have produced significant yet nuanced transformations in household structures, gendered responsibilities, and women’s agency.

Firstly, the study found that women have increasingly assumed financial and administrative roles within the household in the absence of migrant males. Many respondents, previously confined to domestic roles, now handle banking, budgeting, and decision-making related to children’s education and health. This reflects a shift from traditional gender norms, aligning with existing sociological literature on the restructuring of power and responsibilities in transnational families (Kabeer, 2000; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Secondly, women’s roles have expanded, but not without emotional and physical burdens. They now carry the “double load” of being both caretakers and managers of the household. As highlighted in Hochschild’s (1989) concept of the “second shift,” these women often feel overworked, stressed, and isolated, especially in extended family settings where male authority still subtly dominates.

Thirdly, the findings highlight a paradox: While remittances empower women economically and socially, many still operate within patriarchal boundaries. Their control over money and decision-making is often limited to small-scale issues, with final authority remaining with the

absent male or elder family members. This confirms Kandiyoti's (1988) theory of "bargaining with patriarchy," where women negotiate power without fundamentally challenging the gender hierarchy.

Moreover, the study revealed that women associated with remittances often gain social respect and recognition in the community. However, this new status sometimes invites envy and resistance, exposing the fragile nature of gendered empowerment in conservative societies. In essence, this research confirms that remittances act not only as financial capital but also as catalysts for social and gender transformation. The experiences of left-behind women in District Poonch demonstrate that migration and remittances are reshaping the fabric of gender relations, but the process remains uneven, context-dependent, and deeply influenced by local cultural norms.

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