

Migration and Development Conference Comments: Families and Networks

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In this essay I briefly discuss my research on short-term migration from Kerala, India to the Middle Eastern countries to examine some of the issues raised in the other papers in this panel. Kerala is a state in south west India that has had a long tradition of out-migration, both within the country and internationally. It also has diverse types of communities which manifest different patterns of migration. For both of these reasons, it presents a good test case to examine the effects of migration on different types of communities and households and the long-term consequences of migration.

International migration from Kerala began as early as the first few decades of the twentieth century with migrants leaving for Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). The out-migration to the Middle Eastern countries began after the Second World War and became a large-scale phenomenon from the early 1970s. I conducted my research in Kerala between the late 1980s and the early 1990s focusing on the impact of the migration on three very different religio-ethnic communities in Kerala since I found that ethnicity, or the differences in the culture and social structure of the communities, profoundly affected the patterns of migration from the three communities and the impact of migration on them. The three areas that I studied were Veni, a Mappila Muslim village in the North of Kerala, Cherur, a largely Ezhava Hindu village in the South of Kerala, and Kembu, a Syrian Christian village in central Kerala.

Perhaps the most dramatic difference between the three communities was the impact of the migration on women. In Veni, young couples generally lived in the husband's family home and male migration resulted in women and children coming under the direct supervision of the man's family. The migrants entrusted the economic and social supervision of their households to their father or other male relative. Wives of migrants were secluded and their in-laws were strict about enforcing rules to make sure that they did not leave the house without proper escort and that they participated in housework. Male migration also delayed the family's move to an independent house. Even after moving to an independent house, wives of migrants had to guard against giving rise to any rumor regarding their behavior. The separation of spouses as a consequence of the migration hindered the development of a personal relationship between them and contributed to a higher divorce rate. Many women in Veni seemed to manifest signs of psychological stress. Migration also resulted in the earlier marriage of young girls. Early marriage had been a long standing ideal in the community but had usually taken families several

years before they could accumulate the money for the dowry and the wedding costs and marriages had been delayed. Due to the affluence gained through migration however, many families no longer had to wait as long and girls were getting married in their mid to late teens.

In the Cherur Ezhava community, the long tradition of male migration had strengthened the position of women since they were able to remain in their parental homes even after marriage. Thus male migrants left their fathers-in-law in charge of their wives and children. Remittances were generally sent to the wife, particularly after children had been born to the couple. Many older migrant wives continued to perform the economic tasks that had traditionally supplemented the household income (raising cows and chickens, growing vegetables and fruit in the land around the house, weaving coconut fronds) which gave them some economic independence. Women were in charge of lending out a portion of the remittances and collecting the interest. Wives of migrants often played an active role in supervising the construction of the family home. As a consequence of the migration, Cherur had become a female-dominated village, with women being very visible and active in local affairs and politics. The rise of hypogamous marriages where relatively less educated Gulf migrants married college-educated women from reputable families had also raised the status of women and their families.

There were many female migrants from Kambu (most were nurses) and international migration provided such women the opportunity to become the primary income earners or at least important income earners in their own right. The male migrants from this area were also well educated and most were able to obtain white collar jobs in the Middle East which allowed them to obtain longer term work contracts and have their families with them. White-collar migration had increased the emphasis on women's higher education and employment – those who were not nurses usually worked as teachers or as bank tellers. Family migration strengthened spousal bonds and correspondingly weakened the power of the extended family to regulate female behavior. Male migrants who were not able to have their families with them sent their remittances to their wives. Many women played a major role in deciding how the remittances were to be invested and in supervising the management of the rubber cultivation that many of them invested in, as well as the construction of the family home.

The differences in the impact of migration on women in the three communities were not only due to the variation in gender and intergenerational norms but also a consequence of the definitions of honor in each of the three communities. Gender, intergenerational norms, and definitions of honor were in turn influenced by religiously shaped ideas of identity. I would therefore argue that it is important to focus on the community level as well as the household level to understand how migration impacts family members since definitions of “family” might vary across communities. For instance it would surely make a big difference whether “the

elders” who come to the aid of the migrant’s wife are her parents or her in-laws.

Since the Middle Eastern migration from Kerala is at least two generations old now, we can look at Kerala as a case study to examine the longer term impacts of migration, particularly on the children of migrants. Although this was not the focus of my research when I was in Kerala in the 1990s, I heard a lot of talk about how juvenile delinquency was common among the children of migrants. However, I did not come across any evidence to indicate that this was a major problem, and I have also not seen any discussion of this issue in the popular and scholarly literature about the Middle Eastern migration. This might at least partly be because migration is so wide-spread and institutionalized in Kerala that the absence of migrants from their households and communities has been normalized and families have developed alternate mechanisms to deal with child care issues. A more recent research trip (in 2006) to a Syrian Christian dominated central Travancore area of Kerala (near Kembu) seemed to show that the children of Syrian Christian migrants were better educated than their parents and were doing well economically. Some were in good positions in the Middle East or the United States, and others were working in professional positions in urban areas. During the discussion, one of the conference participants similarly made the point that some literature (based on a study of the Philippines, I believe) shows that children of migrants have better educational outcomes than the children of non-migrants. Thus, it is clear that the long-term consequences of the migration on children do not necessarily have to be negative. We need more research to examine this issue.