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Glimpses of Women's Lives in Rural Bihar: Impact of Male Migration

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Bihar has a rich history of out-migration from the state which goes back to as early as the 19th Century. However, in the last few decades, migration for work has increased manifold. The sheer scale of out-migration in contemporary Bihar is astounding. At any given point of time, as many almost one-half of the total working men are absent from the state, working elsewhere in urban and rural centres in the country and abroad. Migration from the state is essentially male and is embedded in the lives and life choices of the people. It is not just a livelihood strategy, but a way of life in rural Bihar. While there is considerable research that studies the nature and pattern of migration from Bihar, profile of migrant workers, migration destination and other such correlates of a migrant's life outside the village, there is sparse literature on the impact of this migration on people, especially women who are left behind in the village. Many research questions remain unanswered. How are institutions such as caste and patriarchy in the village affected by male migration? How does male migration influence women's well being and agency? Does migration have an effect on women's mobility? Does it empower or disempower women left behind? What role does technology such as mobile phones play in communicating and staying in touch with migrant family members? What impact does this have on the women left behind in villages?

This paper engages with the questions raised above and it aims to study and analyse the impact of male migration on women who are left behind in rural Bihar. It explores the various contours of continuity and change in women's lives as a ramification of male migration. It specifically looks at the impact of migration on women's work, both paid and unpaid; on their decision making in the household; on their mobility; on their involvement in managing money and access to credit. This empirical work is based on a survey of groups of women in 12 selected villages across 6 districts of north and south Bihar. A total of 88 groups of women across various castes (Upper castes, Other Backward Castes I & II, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) and socio-religious (Hindu, Upper Muslim, Lower Muslim) groups were surveyed. The paper is a part of a larger study, 'Status of Women in Bihar: Exploring Transformation in Work and Gender Relations' undertaken by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) and supported by the International Labour Organization to ascertain broad insights into the status of women in rural Bihar with a view to examine any signs of transformation in work and gender relations.

I Background and Introduction

The eastern Indian state of Bihar is characterised by low and stagnant economic growth, high levels of poverty, and lowest levels of per capita income among the major states in the country. The Human Development Index for the state has increased only marginally from 0.237 in 1981 to 0.308 in 1991 to 0.367 in 2001, and ranked the lowest among the 15 major states in India. The literacy rate, at 48 per cent is the lowest in the country, and the female literacy rate, at 34 per cent is significantly lower than the male literacy rate, at 60 per cent (Census of India, 2001).

The state has a long history of migration, and the earliest migration stream can be traced to the 1830s, when people migrated as indentured labourers to British colonies of Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad and Fiji. Since the 1960s, a large bulk of migrants has been going to the north western states of Punjab and Haryana to work as agricultural

labourers. At the same time, a significant number also go to several other areas to work in diversified occupations (Sharma, 2005).

Migration from the state to both rural and urban destinations is very high, and is believed to have increased over the decade, with rural people becoming more mobile (Kumar and Banerji, 2010; Deshingkar *et al*, 2009). Remittances from migration have significantly contributed to increased incomes in the state (Bhaskaran and Mehta, 2010; Rodgers and Rodgers, 2000). Apart from contributing to growth processes in other parts of the country, the migrants from Bihar have also been key drivers of social change in rural Bihar.

In India, the decadal census and quinquennial surveys of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) are the two large primary datasets which give information on the incidence of migration, and throw some light on its nature and characteristics. However, both the Census and NSSO, owing to their conceptual framework, survey design and empirical shortcomings have a bias towards long term and permanent migration. They tend to miss out on short-term and circular migration, and thus, underestimate the incidence of migration. Micro and village studies have consistently shown higher levels of migration from poor regions of the country than these conventional data sources (Kumar and Banerji; 2010; Rodgers and Rodgers, 2010; Sharma 1997). Deshingkar and Farrington (2009) estimate more than 100 million people to be short-term migrants in India, in contrast with NSSO's estimate of 10 million people. Contrary to the findings of the conventional sources, they argue that the rural poor are highly mobile, and circular migration is an integral part of the livelihood strategies of the poor.

Having said that, the point that we make is that migration from rural Bihar is high, is essentially male, and is embedded in the lives and life choices of the people. It is not just a livelihood strategy, but a way of life in rural Bihar. While there is considerable research that studies the nature and pattern of migration from Bihar, profile of migrant workers, migration destination and other such correlates of a migrant's life outside the village, there is sparse literature on the impact of this migration on people, especially women who are left behind in the village. Many research questions remain unanswered. How are institutions such as caste and patriarchy in the village affected by male migration? How does male migration influence women's well being and agency? Does migration have an effect on women's mobility? Does it empower or disempower the women left behind? What role does technology such as mobile phones play in communicating and staying in touch with migrant family members? What impact does this have on the women left behind in villages? This paper, based on an empirical study conducted in 12 villages in seven districts of Bihar attempts to address these issues.

Section I has given a background and introduction to migration from Bihar and migration in India. Section II reviews literature on the impact of male migration on women from the broad strands of its ramifications on women's work, on women's decision-making in the household, on new roles and women's mobility, old fears and insecurity, and on patriarchy. Section III, based on an empirical study, after giving the objectives and methodology, gives a background to the migration in the survey villages highlighting key characteristics such as the incidence and destination of migration, basic information on work and occupation of migrants, and details of remittances. It then elucidates finding of the empirical study related to the impact of male migration on women's work, on women's decision making in the household, on women's involvement in managing money, on access to credit, and on women's mobility.

II

Review of Literature

Impact of Male Migration on Women

Most migration research has focused on the role of migrants at the place of destination, and very little is known about their areas of origin (de Haan, 1999). Little research has been done on women influenced strongly by migration, who themselves have not moved but live in village based families where males have left to seek work in other parts of the country, or in other countries. Hugo (2000) contends that families of migrants left behind not only have to deal with the absence of their men, but also the influences of newly acquired money, goods, ideas, attitudes, behaviours and innovations transmitted back to them by the migrants. According to Willis and Yeoh (2000), such household rearrangements can represent an opportunity for a restructuring of gender relations. At the same time, such responsibility may prove to be a double-edged sword. While the absence of a husband may provide greater freedom, there may be economic disadvantages, especially if remittances are irregular or non-existent.

On women's work

The main motivation for migration is expansion of income, and a better life for the household. Often, male migration leads to a rise in household income, and improved standards of living. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990), in a study of a Catholic upper caste village of peasant origin in Goa found that male migration led to withdrawal of women from agricultural work. In the case of Nepal, Loshkin and Glinskaya (2008), using data from the 2004 Nepal household survey, found that male migration for work has a negative impact on the level of market work participation by the women left behind. The impact is the strongest for women in the age-group of 25-35 years and for women who have completed 11 or more years of education.

At the same time, studies also show that the remittances sent back are simply not enough. Jetley (1987), in a study of poor peasants and landless families in rural Uttar Pradesh finds that the additional income through remittances does not substantially change the economic status of the family, and neither does it help it come out of the subsistence level. Instead, women left behind have to assume, in addition to familial and domestic responsibilities, the role of a breadwinner, and older daughters take up household chores, and are surrogate mothers to younger siblings. In a study of women of Saora tribe in Orissa, where men migrate mainly to Assam, Geeta Menon (1995) finds that income from migration does not mitigate poverty. Neither does it make amends for the problems women face in the absence of men. Paris et al (2005), in a study of male outmigration from rice producing regions of eastern Uttar Pradesh find that there is a marked increase in women's agricultural work, including a wide range of farm tasks, a heavier workload, and less time for domestic tasks and childcare. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) in an intensive study of 44 women in 26 families which undertook family stage migration, where male migration preceded that of women and children, from Mexico to the United States, finds that remittances were less than what women left behind expected, or required. They had to resort to informal sector employment such as vending, washing and ironing. Women with young children were doubly burdened as they had to manage child rearing activities, along with income generating activities.

On women's decision making in the household

The structure and composition of a household is a crucial variable to understand the impact of male migration on women. Using data from a large-scale survey in 33 states in India, Desai and Banerjee (2008) argue that women living in nuclear families experience migration differently from their counterparts who live in joint families. The former, unlike the latter, experience both higher levels of autonomy and greater responsibility. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) has found that absence of men for prolonged periods of time made their wives the de facto head of households. They became self-reliant, managed the household, as well as remittances, and supervised farms and house building. The fact that these households were largely nuclear, have implications for greater autonomy of women.

To the contrary, Jetley (1987) argues that though women may be making decisions regarding the daily subsistence of the family, major decisions, such as purchase and sale of land, expenditure on ceremonies, etc. are made by the men, when they visit. Thus, the authority structure of the family remains unchanged.

On new roles and women's mobility

Menon (1995), in her study of the Saora tribe in Orissa finds that migrants' links have remained with lands and their families through the females left behind, making the women upholders of tradition and protectors of household economic assets and family members. She argues, that these roles, on the one hand, prevent women from leaving, and on the other, give the men confidence to move out.

Gulati (1993), in her study of male migrants to the Gulf from Kerala has found that the migration of men breaks down women's isolation, increases mobility and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions than were in their purview before. This results in their gaining greater confidence and taking on more responsibilities. Some of them even take on income generating activities.

Migration also acts as a catalyst to social change. Gulati (1993), in a case study of an illiterate muslim woman, Hameeda, whose husband Jamal was an early migrant to Saudi Arabia, narrates,

'When Jamal is visiting home, he takes me out to the movies. He never insists that I should cover my head. My mother is very orthodox, and would never have permitted me such liberty. But she is in such great awe of Jamal that she does not interfere with anything he wants me to do on his short visits. Actually, now several women in our neighbourhood have stopped covering their heads and go to the movies in short-sleeved blouses. You need someone to take the initiative and introduce these small changes.' (pp 31).

On old fears and insecurity

For women left behind, male migration is not easy, and migration is viewed as a period of hardship (Hoodfar, 1996). Often, women's apprehensions about male migration are related to (the fear of) divorce and desertion (Menon, 1995). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) found that many of the women were opposed to their husband's migration, primarily because of the fear of being abandoned by them. She documents trials and tribulations that women undergo, when they are faced with providing for their families, and caring for them, in the absence of their husbands. Women candidly share their feelings of how it is unfair that extra burdens are imposed on them. Jetley's (1987) study throws light on the

insecurities women face, when left behind by men. She finds that one-third of the women interviewed were positively unhappy about their men migrating, and one-half regretted the long absence of male members of the family. Unlike the Mexican women in Hondagneu-Sotelo's study, these Indian women, no matter how unhappy they were, did not find it appropriate to share their personal experiences. Yet, 43 per cent of them said that they felt lonely without their men, and felt helpless too. Male migration was viewed as unavoidable, and the women were reconciled to it.

On patriarchy

Has male migration been a catalyst in the reorganisation of gender relations? Has it been able to make a dent on the institution of patriarchy? Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) argues that the migration process reconstructs patriarchy. While patriarchal gender relations organised (family stage) migration, lengthy spousal separations altered patterns of patriarchal authority and the traditional gendered household division of labour. She finds that long-term migrants who had stayed in the US in 'bachelor communities' learnt cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores. When they were reunited with their families, they continued these activities, and such households had a more non-traditional division of labour. On the other hand, Jetley (1987) finds that when male migrants return home for a fortnight or a month every year, in rural Uttar Pradesh, India, they seldom help in household chores, though they are used to cooking, cleaning and washing in the city.

Homa Hoodfar (1996), based on anthropological fieldwork with families in urban Cairo, Egypt, where male members migrated to the Middle East/ Gulf countries, argues that migration may have feminised the Egyptian families, led to women becoming de facto heads of their households, and women may be contributing more to the household now, than they did before, but migration, by widening the gap between male and female incomes had also hardened traditional gender roles of men being breadwinners, and women being homemakers.

Migration is both gendered and gendering (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). While migration being gendered is associated with the 'male' character of outmigration, it is also a gendering process, in the sense that can enable women to command a personal income, negotiate public spaces; foster their autonomy and esteem, and enhance their agency and well-being.

In essence, migration is motivated by an aspiration for a better life. Be it the Saora tribals in Orissa, or the landless and small peasants in Uttar Pradesh, or migrants from Kerala to the Gulf, an innate desire to improve the life of their families is what initiates the process of migration, and sustains its trajectory. In the rural heart belts migration is not just about moving up the economic ladder. Migration symbolises modernity, and the possibility of upward (social) mobility. Migrants from the city bring back with them not just goods and goodies, but also new ideas and attitudes to a stagnant rural society. While women may have reservations about their men migrating, and endure in their absence, they also aspire for economic and social change, and are agents in providing a conducive atmosphere for male migration. This is crucial for understanding complex gender roles and relations which define and govern the migration process in subtle, but fundamental ways.

III Findings of an Empirical Study

Objectives and methodology

Based on an empirical study, this section¹ aims to analyse the impact of male migration on the lives of women left behind in rural Bihar. It explores the various contours of continuity and change in the lives of these women, specifically looking at the impact of migration on women's work, both paid and unpaid; on their decision making in the household; on their mobility, on their involvement in money management and access to credit. This empirical work is based on a survey of groups of women in 12 selected villages across seven districts of north and south Bihar. A total of 88 groups of women across various castes (Upper castes, Other Backward Castes I & II, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) and socio-religious (Hindu, Upper Muslim, Lower Muslim) groups were surveyed.

Fieldwork for this study was undertaken from November 2009 to February 2010. To understand the impact of male migration on gender relations within the household and within the community, three sources of primary data were used. First the household schedule, which was administered in 976 households in the 12 villages. Second, the village schedule which was used to obtain crucial information from key informants in the survey villages. Third and the most important, a specially designed gender module was used to complement the village schedule. As caste is the most important unit of social organisation in rural Bihar, the gender module was administered to groups of women from various castes in a particular village. Very often, hamlets within each village were synonymous with caste habitations. In consultation with key informants in the village, all the *tolas* (hamlets) in each village were identified. The module was administered in various *tolas* in the village to capture the diverse groups of women in the village. Therefore in a small village with less social diversity and few *tolas*, the number of gender modules administered was less than a village with more castes (and *tolas*). In total 88 groups of women were interviewed. The module contained 93 questions, some structured and others open-ended, enabling us to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

The 12 survey villages were earlier studied in 1981-83 and 1998-99, and we revisited them in 2009-10. The methodology for the selection of survey districts, blocks, villages and households was the same for all the three surveys. As rural Bihar is very heterogeneous, pure random technique was not used. A combination of purposive and random sampling techniques was used. Six districts were selected on the basis of cluster analysis of 24 plain districts of then Bihar.² Cluster analysis was based on several variables (such as population growth, population density, urbanisation, tenancy, cropping intensity, use of HYV seeds, irrigation, etc.), and one district from each cluster was selected. Within each district, three blocks were selected, and in each block, one small and one large village selected. Altogether, six villages were selected from each district, and two villages from each district were selected for detailed investigation. Thus,

¹ The section is a part of a larger study, 'Status of Women in Bihar: Exploring Transformation in Work and Gender Relations', undertaken by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) and supported by the International Labour Organization to seek broad insights into the status of women in rural Bihar with a view to examine any signs of transformation in work and gender relations.

² Bihar has since been divided into two states. In 2000, Bihar was bifurcated and a new state, Jharkhand, was carved out from the southern part of erstwhile Bihar.

total 12 villages were selected after preliminary analysis of village-level data for 36 villages.

A background to migration in survey villages

District	Village	Households with at least one migrant member (in %)
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	55
	Rupaspur Salempur	54.8
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	67.1
	Paharpur Deyal	76.2
Madhubani	Khangaon	61.9
	Mahisan	84.4
Nalanda	Chandkura	44.7
	Mohiuddinpur	72.4
Purnia	Belabadan	65.9
Araria	Jitwarpur	48.5
Rohtas	Amarhi	35.3
	Samhauti Buzurg	37.5

Source: IHD Household Schedule (2010)

The incidence of male migration was very high in the survey villages. From the household survey, it was found that the percentage of households with at least one male migrant varied from 35.3 per cent in Amarhi in Rohtas to 84.4 per cent in Mahisan in Madhubani (Table 1). On the whole, the incidence of migration was found to be higher in the villages of North Bihar, in comparison to South Bihar.

District	Village	Migrants to rural destinations (in %)	Migrants to urban destinations (in %)
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	4.5	95.5
	Rupaspur Salempur	2.9	97.1
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	2.1	97.9
	Paharpur Deyal	0	100
Madhubani	Khangaon	12.9	87.1
	Mahisan	19.3	80.7
Nalanda	Chandkura	2.6	97.4
	Mohiuddinpur	9.5	90.5
Purnia	Belabadan	55.2	44.8
Araria	Jitwarpur	33	67
Rohtas	Amarhi	0	100
	Samhauti Buzurg	6.7	93.3

Source: IHD Household Schedule (2010)

An overwhelming majority of migrants from the survey villages went to urban destinations for work (Table 2). An exception to this norm was the village of Belabadan

in North Bihar, which saw a majority of migrants with rural destinations. The proportion of households with rural migration was found to be higher in the districts of North Bihar in comparison to South Bihar. In fact, in two of the 12 survey villages, all the migration was to urban areas. In another six villages, more than 90 per cent of the migrants went to urban areas. The remaining four villages in the districts of Purnia, Madhubani and Araria in North Bihar had considerably higher migration to rural areas.

From the village schedule, it was found that Delhi is the most popular destination for migrants. The national capital has migrants from all the survey villages, whereas, Patna, the state capital, has migrants from very few survey villages. In addition, other common destinations for migrants include Mumbai in Maharashtra; Vapi, Surat and Ahmedabad in Gujarat; Gurgaon, Noida, Bhiwadi, Ghaziabad in the National Capital Region, Delhi; Kolkata and Siliguri in West Bengal; Jamshedpur, Ranchi and Bokaro in Jharkhand; Kapurthala, Moga, Barnala, Sangrur, Firozpur, Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana in Punjab; and Panipat and Bhiwadi in Haryana. Muslims from Gopalganj districts were also found to migrate to Middle-Eastern or Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and United Arab Emirates.

Table 3: Destination of migrants from survey villages			
District	Village	Migrants to destinations within Bihar (in %)	Migrants to destinations outside Bihar (in %)
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	9.1	90.9
	Rupaspur Salempur	5.9	94.1
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	4.3	95.7
	Paharpur Deyal	0.0	100.0
Madhubani	Khangaon	7.1	92.9
	Mahisan	4.2	95.8
Nalanda	Chandkura	36.8	63.2
	Mohiuddinpur	28.6	71.4
Purnia	Belabandan	5.2	94.8
Araria	Jitwarpur	3.2	96.8
Rohtas	Amarhi	22.2	77.8
	Samhauti Buzurg	0.0	100.0

Source: IHD Household Schedule (2010)

Another feature of outmigration from survey villages was the preponderance of migration outside the state (Table 3). In two of the 12 survey villages, the total outmigration was outside Bihar. In another seven villages, more than 90 per cent of the migrants went to destinations outside the state. In the remaining three villages, two had more than 70 per cent of migration outside the states, whereas only one village had less than 70 per cent migration outside the state.

District	Village	Work Status			
		Self Employed Worker	Regular Salaried Worker	Daily Wage Worker	Others
		(in %)			
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	0	62	38	0
	Rupaspur Salempur	3	85	12	3
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	6.5	44	48	8
	Paharpur Deyal	0	86	14	0
Madhubani	Khangaon	2.9	54	41	5
	Mahisan	9.5	35	54	11
Nalanda	Chandkura	8.3	50	42	8
	Mohiuddinpur	9.5	62	29	9
Purnia	Belabadan	6.9	16	74	10
Araria	Jitwarpur	2.1	9.6	86	4.4
Rohtas	Amarhi	0	89	5.6	5.4
	Samhauti Buzurg	0	61	39	0

Source: IHD Household Schedule

Table 4 gives the work status of the male migrants at their destination. In eight of the 12 villages, a majority of migrants were regular salaried workers. However, in three of the four villages in North Bihar, a majority of the workers were daily wage labourers. Clearly, the terms of work were more precarious for migrants from North Bihar, vis-à-vis South Bihar. Interestingly, self-employed workers were found in eight of the 12 villages, and they were almost 10 per cent of the total migrant workers in three villages.

District	Village	Agriculture	Skilled Artisan	Transport Worker	Construction	Coolie	Small Industry	Dhaba / Small Restaurant	Sales Worker	Security Worker	Others	Total
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	0.0	38.1	0.0	9.5	23.8	14.3	100
	Rupaspur Salempur	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	54.5	0.0	9.1	6.1	12.1	100
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	0.0	26.7	11.1	15.6	4.4	22.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	13.3	100
	Paharpur Deyal	0.0	14.3	0.0	7.1	0.0	64.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	100

Madhubani	Khangaon	10.1	2.9	7.2	23.2	2.9	17.4	7.2	7.2	11.6	10.1	100
	Mahisan	18.1	8.6	3.4	14.7	0.9	28.4	0.9	5.2	1.7	18.1	100
Nalanda	Chandkura	0.0	13.9	0.0	19.4	5.6	38.9	0.0	2.8	0.0	19.4	100
	Mohiuddinpur	0.0	9.5	0.0	19.0	9.5	38.1	0.0	14.3	0.0	9.5	100
Purnia	Belabadan	58.6	10.3	3.4	5.2	0.0	1.7	0.0	12.1	0.0	8.6	100
Araria	Jitwarpur	25.5	8.5	1.1	50.0	0.0	4.3	0.0	1.1	0.0	9.6	100
Rohtas	Amarhi	5.6	0.0	11.1	0.0	0.0	38.9	5.6	0.0	27.8	11.1	100
	Samhauti Buzurg	0.0	3.6	3.6	3.6	0.0	64.3	0.0	0.0	7.1	17.9	100

Source: IHD Household Schedule (2010)

Migrants commonly worked in small industries, and as skilled artisans, construction workers, sales workers and security workers (Table 5). There was a concentration of migrants from North Bihar in the agricultural sector.

Table 6: Remittances			
District	Village	Migrants who remitted money home in the last one year (in %)	Mean Annual remittance (in Rs.)
Gaya	Alalpur Bishunpur	96	26150
	Rupaspur Salempur	88	20000
Gopalganj	Dewan Parsa	96	38909
	Paharpur Deyal	100	37063
Madhubani	Khangaon	97	19654
	Mahisan	99	19788
Nalanda	Chandkura	97	26297
	Mohiuddinpur	100	15381
Purnia	Belabadan	98	16684
Araria	Jitwarpur	100	17950
Rohtas	Amarhi	83	33400
	Samhauti Buzurg	90	19308

Source: IHD Household Schedule (2010)

Sending remittances to their families back home was a near universal phenomenon among the migrants (Table 6). In three of the 12 survey villages, all the migrants sent money back home. In another seven villages, more than 90 per cent, and in the remaining two villages, more than 80 per cent of the migrants respectively sent money back home. The average amount of annual remittance varied from approximately Rs. 15,000 to almost Rs. 40,000 per year; and was found to be lesser in North Bihar in comparison to South Bihar.

Impact of male migration in survey villages

In interviews with key respondents in survey villages, a unanimous agreement emerged across all the survey villages that migration for work had increased in the last five years. Women's lives were greatly impacted by this. In households where male members had

migrated, women graduated to doing those tasks which were earlier looked after by the male members. These included decision-making in the household, managing money, agricultural tasks, supervision of farms, and household enterprise management. Now, we discuss the impact of male migration in survey villages, as per the findings of the gender module.

As already noted, for the gender module, a total of 88 groups from 12 villages in seven districts of Bihar were interviewed. Of these, 12 groups belonged to upper caste, 14 were OBC I, 24 were OBC II, 28 were Scheduled Castes, one group was Scheduled Tribe, and nine were Muslim groups. Of the 88 groups studied, 69 (78 per cent) groups had households with migrating males.

On women's work

Male migration at the survey sites brought about profound changes in the work women did – within and outside the household. As many 59 (86 per cent) groups reported an increase in tasks when male members of the family migrated. Women necessarily undertook more tasks, including those which required mobility. Women from 33 (48 per cent) groups reported that they went to the doctor, from 31 (45 per cent) groups said that they went to the market, while women from 6 (9 per cent) groups reported that they went to their children's schools, and, women from 3 (4 per cent) groups said that they visited relatives on their own. While women were likely to go outside the *tola* in the company of other women, they also went alone, when required.

In agriculture

Specifically in relation to agricultural activities, women from 30 (43 per cent) groups reported that their tasks had increased after male migration. New agricultural activities undertaken by women included management of farms, as reported by 8 (12 per cent) groups and animal husbandry, as reported by 4 (6 per cent) groups.

Though it appeared that the nature of work for most women has remained the same before and after migration, there were many caveats. Women who were agricultural labourers before their husbands migrated continued to remain agricultural labourers, while additionally tending to animals and single-handedly undertaking many other activities which were earlier shared by the male and female members of the family.

Similarly, the burden of work tremendously increased for women who worked in family farms, and as sharecroppers, after male members of their families migrated. *Kurmi*³ women in Paharpur Dayal said that they “struggled more than the men”. In the recent years, there has been a movement away from agricultural labour towards sharecropping in the survey sites. This trend, naturally, has ramifications for women's work in families which practised sharecropping, especially in the context of high migration in the region.

For families owning large tracts of land, women had to oversee work in the farms, pay agricultural labourers, and often make decisions related to sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, usage of seeds and fertilisers and other such activities in agriculture in the absence of their husbands.

³ Kurmi caste is classified as an Other Backward Caste II.

In non agriculture

Not many changes were reported in non-agricultural work done by women in the survey villages, post migration of men from their communities. This can be explained mainly by the lack of options for non-agricultural work. However, we found that animal husbandry absorbed substantial time of women across different castes and classes.

In the Mansuri⁴ *tola* in Jitwarpur, women were mainly agricultural labourers. They also worked as construction labourers and at brick kilns when they got the opportunity. They said the burden of their work had increased after male migration, even though they did these all of these works earlier. *Musahar*⁵ women in Khangaon told us that, “when men were there, the work was shared. Now women do that work alone”. *Musahar* women in Jitwarpur said, “We have to work at home and also on the farms; more than the men.” *Kurmi* women in Amarhi said they now had to, “pay labourers, oversee and manage work on the farm, give fodder to animals”. Brahmin⁶ women in Jitwarpur responded that other than taking care of the animals on their own, they had “complete responsibility of children”.

In traditional occupations

Widespread migration of men from the survey site to other parts of the country led to significant changes in the traditional occupations in the village as well. In the *Dhobi*⁷ community, as men migrated to cities, women now performed tasks which they did not do earlier. In addition to washing and ironing clothes all by themselves, they were also involved in delivering clothes to their *jajmans*, an activity which was only done by men earlier. Interestingly, it has been noted that in the more developed villages such as Dewanparsa in Gopalganj, the *Dhobis* have stopped any sort of *jajmani*⁸ activities.

The *Kumhar*⁹ community too reported that their traditional occupation of making clay pots has significantly declined, as the demand for these had reduced considerably within the village. Here too, men migrated in search of work, while women marginally remain involved in the traditional occupation.

With the *Mallahs*¹⁰ it was found that as work for men is shrinking in their traditional occupation of fishing, the women are forced to undertake activities like preparing snacks, selling them in the *haat* (local market), becoming street vendors, and working long hours. They also sold flour, after having it processed at nearby mills, puffed rice (*muri*), bananas and tobacco at the *haat*. These new activities undertaken by women were precarious and temporary in nature, reflecting the survival strategies of a community, which struggles to find work in a changing environment.

In traditional occupations, women’s contact with the marketplace for business and sale was minimal. In the *Koeri* community, a caste which predominantly grew vegetables, the women were involved in all aspects of vegetable-growing except their sale. Men

⁴ Mansuri is classified as lower Muslims.

⁵ Musahars are the lowest in the rung of the Scheduled Castes.

⁶ Brahmins are accorded the highest status in the caste hierarchy

⁷ Traditional washer people, Dhobi caste is classified as Scheduled Caste.

⁸ *Jajmani* system is a caste based relationship where a particular lower caste family renders specific services to an upper caste family. This patron-client relationship is hereditary in nature, and an integral part of social life in rural India. In the recent past, the *jajmani* system has undergone considerable decline.

⁹ Traditional potters, Kumhar caste is classified as Other Backward Caste II.

¹⁰ Traditional fisherfolks, Mallahs are classified as an Other Backward Caste I.

exclusively sold the vegetables, just as in the *Mallah* community, where men sold their catch in the market. The women were not involved in this aspect of work. Migration did not lead to a greater role for women in traditional activities here, as it had in some other cases mentioned above.

On women's decision making in the household

It was evident that after male migration, women were more involved in making decisions. Women from 36 (52 per cent) of the 69 groups reported that they were more involved in decision-making in the household. It is interesting to note that with the aid of mobile phones, communication with migrants was easy and done often. Women frequently consulted their husbands on the phone about various decisions being made in the household. Telephonic conversations with their sons and husbands in faraway lands were also a common source of news and information. If a woman lived in a joint family, the parents-in-law generally played a major role in key decisions made in the household. Having said that, women across *tolas* clearly articulated their involvement in crucial and everyday decision-making in the household, in the absence of their husbands. *Mallah* women in Mahisan said, "From buying vegetables to choosing our saris, we make all the decisions ourselves." Women in the *Yadav*¹¹ *tola* in Amarhi said that they took independent decisions on matters ranging from arranging marriages to how to spend money. When a research investigator asked *Ansari* women in Jitwarpur whether they consulted their husbands who were away, they asked in an exasperated manner, "Are we supposed to keep asking them all the time?" Brahmin women in Jitwarpur told us that they took decisions regarding their children's education and managed remittances. Women in the *Chamar tola* in Jitwarpur said that they took all the decisions on their own "because we don't trust anyone else".

At the same time, strong footholds of patriarchy were felt in the voices of those, such as the *Koeri* women in Amarhi, who said, "all decisions are taken by parents-in-law"; the *Yadav* women in Mahisam confided that their in-laws control everything and they have to ask their husbands for consent. Another common response elicited from the *Nai* and *Chamar tolas* in Khangaon and the *Harijan tola* in Amarhi was that whilst women make small decisions on their own, they consult their husbands and parents-in-laws for bigger decisions.

On women's involvement in managing money

With their husbands away, women were also more involved in managing money in the household. Women from 36 (52 per cent) of the 69 groups reported that they were more involved in the management of money, after male members of the household migrated. Here, it is interesting to note the caste-wise patterns. While not a single upper caste group of women reported a change in the management of money after male migration, a majority of OBC II and Scheduled Caste groups, and all Muslim groups reported that women were more involved in the management of money in the household after male migration.

A woman in the *Paswan*¹² *tola* in Belabadan said, "It (managing money) was a bit hard in the beginning, but got used to it." Women in *Kurmi tola* in Paharpur Dayal, *Ansari*¹³ *tola* in Mahisam and *Chamar tola* in Jitwarpur had identical responses, when asked if they

¹¹ Yadav caste is classified as Other Backward Caste II.

¹² Paswan caste is classified as Scheduled Castes.

¹³ Ansari is classified as lower Muslims.

were more involved in managing money in the absence of male members of the household. They simply retorted, “If we don’t, who will?” In some *tolas* of the survey sites, albeit a minority, women reported that only their parents-in-law managed all the money in the household.

On women’s access to credit

In the absence of male members of the family, women often face barriers in both accessing credit, and getting credit on favourable terms. When women needed to borrow money, the sources of debt were the moneylender, reported by 53 groups (77 per cent); neighbours, reported by 18 groups (26 per cent); relatives/ caste members, reported by four groups (6 per cent) and Self Help Groups, reported by one group (1.4 per cent). It was observed that women from upper castes and OBC II communities found it easier to borrow money from neighbours and relatives/ caste members, vis-à-vis women from OBC I, Scheduled Castes and lower Muslim communities, who were on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder. Thus, while richer, landed women from upper caste households were often able to borrow money from their friends and neighbours, the poorer women had to resort to the moneylender. Interest rates varied from 5-10 per cent per month, and it appears that women from the poorer communities like the *Chamars*, *Paswans*, *Musahars*¹⁴ and *Mallahs* paid a higher interest rate. *Paswan* women in Khangaon told us that the regular interest rate paid by them was 6-7 per cent per month, but sometimes, out of helplessness, when money was urgently required, they ended up paying 10 per cent. Even in the Brahmin *tola* in Jitwarpur, women complained, “We often have problems getting loan; it’s not easy.” In some communities, women borrowed from family members and paid them back with interest.

On women’s mobility, on patriarchy

As complex as the phenomenon of migration is, the larger impact of male migration can be considered to be a benign one, for women’s mobility in rural Bihar. When asked if their mobility had changed in the last 10 years, as many as 68 (77 per cent) of the 88 groups answered in the affirmative. While only seven (58 per cent) of the 12 upper caste women’s groups felt that their mobility had increased in the last 10 years, all the nine (100 per cent) upper and lower Muslim women’s groups asserted that their mobility had increased. This indeed reveals far reaching changes in attitudes of communities perceived to be conservative.

Thus, in spite of a strong hold of patriarchy in the rural Bihar society, women were found to be quite mobile. The nuclear family was widespread, as we saw in the survey sites. We found that the pervasive hold of parents-in-law over the household and married women had considerably reduced. *Kurmi* women in Amarhi told us, “Now, there are less restrictions, we get out of the house more often. Earlier, in-laws restricted us a lot.”

As it appears from the Dhuniya *tola* in Belabadan, while the men migrated to Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Kashmir etc. increasing the work pressure for women, they responded that they have become self confident and more aware in turn; want their children to be educated; and participate in SHG activity. In spite of the fact that they live in a village with no men (literally), they said they felt safe. It appeared in a discussion with *Chamar* women in Jitwarpur that after male migration to North India, their economic condition had greatly improved. The women said that they sometimes chose not to go to work, as the pressure to work for survival has considerably reduced.

Women's mobility outside the tola

The *tola* where a particular caste resides has been considered as an undefined boundary wherein women can move around. Historically, women's mobility outside the *tola*, for most castes and communities has been restricted – its severity defined by where women can be located in the caste hierarchy. Higher the caste, more severe is the restrictions. We wanted to know, if in the last 10 years, there had been any changes in women's mobility outside the *tola*. At the survey sites, there was a unanimous sense that women, across all castes had become more mobile, and were going out of the *tola* for work errands and leisure more frequently than earlier. However, in the lower castes, where women have always been more mobile, and faced fewer restrictions, women said there were no changes in the situation regarding their movement outside the *tola*, as they were fairly mobile in the past, and continued being so.

It is interesting to note that male migration has been quite a catalyst in enhancing women's mobility, especially in some conservative communities. Women went outside the *tola* to work in the farms – as agricultural labourers and cultivators. Women also went to their children's school, the doctor, market, local *haat*, to purchase groceries and vegetables. *Paswan* women in Mahisan said that “we can go alone for any kind of work now”.

Women mostly went outside in the company of other women from their *tola*. However, we heard that they also went out alone, and carried on with their work, if they did not find company. Among the upper castes however, the picture was somewhat different. In Sahmuti Buzurg, in the Mahabrahmin *tola*, women told us that they normally never went out, and if they did, it was with a male member of the family. Women in the *Rajput*¹⁵ and *Lohar*¹⁶ *tola* said that they only left the *tola* for religious activities.

It was found that an overwhelming majority of women even bought their own saris. This was not a common practice in the past. Not long ago, women reported that their mothers-in-law and husbands bought saris for them. On the outset, this may appear as trivial information, but it sheds light on the deep changes which are taking place in rural Bihar. It reflects an enhancement of the agency of these women as their mobility increases. This is indeed an instrumental change.

Historically, women in upper caste societies have stayed within the realm of their homes. Their movement in the outside world was severely restricted. The lower castes, however, have always been fairly mobile. With growing disposable incomes in the rural belts, a process of *sanskritisation* can perhaps be observed, where the economically better off lower castes now seem to look down upon women's work. We find in the communities where women undertook paid work in the past they are now confined to being homemakers – and quite content about not having to go out to work.¹⁷ Paradoxically, this *decreased* mobility of women outside the *tola* may be perceived as a leap in their social status in the village.

¹⁵ Rajput caste is classified as Upper Caste

¹⁶ Lohar caste is classified as Other Backward Caste II

¹⁷ Paswan women in Khangaon fit this category. They also reported that women in their tola were less mobile than they were 10 years ago.

Conclusion

We have seen that migration of men has brought about several changes in the work women do – within and outside their household. While women's workload has considerably increased, they have also become more mobile. At the same time, while they play a major role in the private sphere, their participation in the public sphere is still limited. And, while migration of men has brought about profound changes in women's lives in rural Bihar, patriarchy and caste continue to be institutions which define and govern them in a fundamental way.

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