

Invisible Costs of Mobility: A Rural Sociological Analysis of Migration, Social Disruption, and Left-Behind Family Vulnerability in India

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1. Introduction

Human mobility has emerged as one of the most significant demographic and socioeconomic processes shaping contemporary societies. Across developing economies, migration functions as a critical livelihood strategy through which households seek to diversify income sources, reduce economic vulnerability, and improve living standards. While migration has traditionally been examined from the perspective of migrants and destination regions, growing scholarly attention has shifted toward understanding its consequences for the family members who remain in places of origin. These "left-behind" populations, consisting primarily of women, children, and elderly family members, experience profound transformations in their social, economic, and emotional lives as a result of migration-induced family separation (De Haas, 2021).

India represents one of the world's largest internal migration systems. According to the Census of India (2011), more than 450 million individuals were classified as migrants based on place of last residence, accounting for nearly 37 percent of the country's population. Rural-to-urban and interstate migration have become increasingly important features of India's development trajectory, driven by regional disparities in employment opportunities, agricultural distress, urbanization, industrial expansion, and the growing demand for labour in construction, manufacturing, and service sectors (Srivastava, 2020). The expansion of labour mobility has contributed significantly to household income generation through remittances and has been widely recognized as a mechanism for poverty alleviation and economic advancement (World Bank, 2023).

Despite these potential economic benefits, migration is not a cost-free process. The departure of working-age household members frequently alters family structures, caregiving arrangements, social relationships, and community dynamics in rural areas. The concept of the "left-behind family" has therefore become increasingly important in migration scholarship. Existing research suggests that migration can generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities for household members who remain at the place of origin. While remittances may improve household consumption, housing quality, healthcare access, and educational investments, prolonged family separation can simultaneously increase emotional stress, caregiving burdens, and social insecurity among remaining family members (Antman, 2013; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009).

The effects of migration on left-behind children have attracted considerable academic attention. Studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America indicate that parental migration may produce mixed educational outcomes. Increased household income often enables greater investment in schooling; however, parental absence may negatively affect children's emotional well-being, academic performance, and school attendance (Lu, 2014; UNICEF, 2019). In the Indian context, evidence suggests that the educational consequences of migration vary according to the duration of migration, household socioeconomic status, gender, and the availability of alternative caregivers (Bhagat, Reshmi, Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020).

Similarly, migration significantly influences the lives of women who remain in rural households. Male out-migration frequently leads to the feminization of agricultural and domestic responsibilities, requiring women to assume additional economic and caregiving roles. While some studies report increased decision-making authority

and financial autonomy among left-behind women, others highlight heightened workloads, social isolation, and psychological stress (Deshingkar, 2018; Gartaula, Niehof, & Visser, 2012). Consequently, migration often produces a complex and contradictory process whereby empowerment and vulnerability coexist within the same household context.

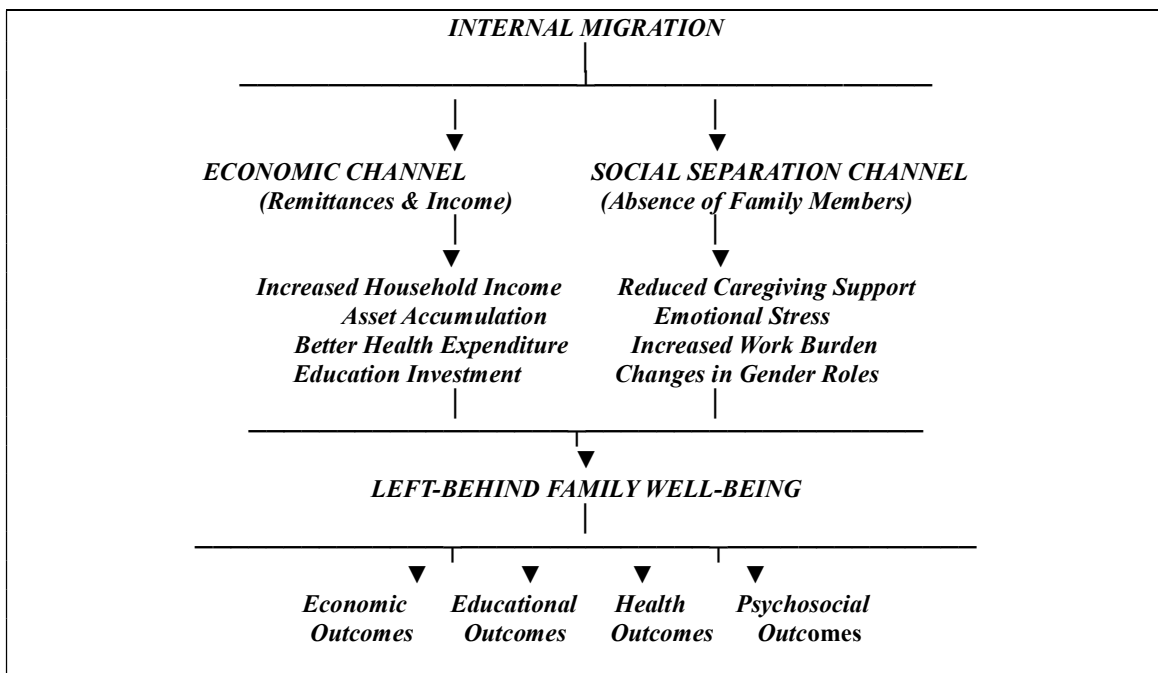
The elderly constitute another particularly vulnerable group within migrant-sending households. In traditional Indian family structures, older adults rely heavily on adult children for economic support, healthcare assistance, and emotional companionship. The migration of younger family members may therefore weaken informal care networks and contribute to loneliness, reduced social participation, and adverse health outcomes. Although remittances can partially compensate for the loss of direct support, financial transfers cannot fully substitute for physical presence and caregiving functions (Lei, Desai, & Chen, 2021).

Recent theoretical developments within migration studies emphasize that migration should be understood not merely as an individual economic decision but as a household strategy embedded within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) argues that migration decisions are collectively undertaken by households to overcome market failures and manage risks associated with imperfect credit, insurance, and labour markets (Stark & Bloom, 1985). While this framework effectively explains the economic rationale behind migration, it also underscores the need to examine the distribution of migration's benefits and costs among different household members. Consequently, understanding the experiences of left-behind families has become essential for evaluating the broader developmental implications of migration.

Although a substantial body of international literature has examined migration and family well-being, research focusing specifically on left-behind populations in rural India remains fragmented across disciplines and thematic areas. Existing studies tend to investigate isolated dimensions such as remittances, children's education, women's empowerment, or elderly care independently. Comprehensive syntheses that integrate the economic, educational, health, psychosocial, and gendered consequences of migration within a unified analytical framework remain limited. Furthermore, the rapidly changing patterns of internal migration, particularly following economic restructuring, urban expansion, and recent disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitate a reassessment of the evidence concerning migrant-sending communities.

Against this backdrop, the present study provides a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing evidence on the socioeconomic and psychosocial consequences of internal migration for left-behind families in rural India. Drawing upon secondary data sources including the Census of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), India Human Development Survey (IHDS), government reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature, the study seeks to examine how migration influences household welfare, educational attainment, health outcomes, gender relations, caregiving responsibilities, and social vulnerability. By integrating diverse strands of evidence, the paper contributes to the growing literature on migration and development while offering policy insights for promoting inclusive and family-sensitive migration governance in India.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Migration and Left-Behind Family Well-Being



2. Theoretical Framework and Research Gap

Understanding the consequences of migration for left-behind family members requires a multidimensional theoretical perspective that extends beyond conventional economic explanations of population mobility. Migration is not merely an individual response to wage differentials; rather, it is embedded within broader household strategies, social relationships, and institutional contexts that collectively shape the well-being of those who remain in migrant-sending communities. Consequently, this study draws upon the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), Social Capital Theory, and the Care Economy Framework to explain the diverse outcomes experienced by left-behind families in rural India.

The New Economics of Labour Migration, developed by Stark and Bloom (1985), provides a useful foundation for understanding household migration decisions. Unlike neoclassical migration theories that emphasize individual utility maximization, NELM conceptualizes migration as a collective household strategy designed to diversify income sources and reduce exposure to economic risks. In rural economies characterized by imperfect labour markets, limited access to formal credit, and high income uncertainty, migration serves as a mechanism through which households secure financial stability. Remittances generated by migrant workers often enhance household consumption, facilitate investment in education and healthcare, and contribute to asset accumulation (Taylor, 1999; Stark & Bloom, 1985). Within the Indian context, where agriculture remains vulnerable to climatic shocks and seasonal fluctuations, migration frequently functions as an adaptive livelihood strategy that strengthens household resilience (Srivastava, 2020).

While NELM effectively explains the economic motivations underlying migration, its emphasis on financial outcomes provides only a partial understanding of migration's broader social consequences. To address this limitation, Social Capital Theory offers valuable insights into the relational dimensions of migration. According to Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), social capital consists of networks, trust, reciprocity, and social relationships that facilitate cooperation and collective well-being. Migration alters these social structures by physically separating family members and disrupting established patterns of interaction and support. Although remittances may strengthen material conditions, prolonged family separation can weaken emotional bonds, reduce parental supervision, and diminish informal caregiving arrangements. Consequently, migration may simultaneously generate economic gains while eroding important forms of social support that contribute to household welfare.

The Care Economy Framework further expands this analysis by highlighting the significance of unpaid caregiving labour within households and communities. Folbre (2006) argues that care work constitutes a fundamental yet frequently overlooked component of economic and social reproduction. In migrant-sending households, the departure of working-age adults often leads to a redistribution of caregiving responsibilities among women, elderly family members, and older children. This redistribution can increase workloads, intensify time poverty, and reinforce existing gender inequalities. At the same time, women left behind may acquire greater decision-making authority and economic autonomy as they assume responsibilities traditionally performed by migrant male household members (Gartaula, Niehof, & Visser, 2012). Thus, migration creates complex processes in which empowerment and vulnerability frequently coexist.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives suggests that migration influences left-behind households through two interconnected pathways. The first pathway operates through remittances and enhanced financial resources, generating positive effects on consumption, asset ownership, educational investment, and healthcare access. The second pathway operates through family separation and changing household dynamics, producing potential challenges related to caregiving, psychosocial well-being, educational supervision, and social cohesion. The interaction between these pathways ultimately determines the overall well-being of left-behind family members and explains why migration outcomes often vary across households, communities, and regions.

Despite the growing body of migration scholarship, several important gaps remain within the literature concerning left-behind families in India. First, migration research has historically prioritized migrants themselves, particularly their labour market experiences, earnings, and integration within destination regions, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to the multidimensional experiences of those who remain in migrant-sending communities (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Second, existing studies frequently focus on isolated dimensions of migration, such as remittances, educational outcomes, women's empowerment, or elderly care, without examining how these dimensions interact to shape household welfare. This fragmentation has resulted in a limited understanding of migration as a comprehensive social process affecting multiple aspects of family life simultaneously.

Third, empirical findings remain inconsistent. While several studies report improvements in income levels, educational attainment, and women's autonomy, others identify negative consequences including emotional distress, educational disruption, increased caregiving burdens, and declining social support systems (Bhagat et al., 2020; Lu, 2014). These contradictory findings suggest that migration outcomes are highly context-specific and mediated by socioeconomic conditions, gender relations, and institutional environments. Fourth, much of the available evidence is derived from localized studies conducted in specific regions or states, limiting broader understanding of migration's consequences across diverse rural settings in India.

Finally, contemporary migration dynamics have evolved considerably in response to urbanization, labour market restructuring, digital financial inclusion, and the socioeconomic disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing reviews have not sufficiently synthesized these recent developments within a comprehensive analytical framework. Accordingly, there remains a need for an updated and integrated assessment of the economic, educational, health, psychosocial, and gendered consequences of migration for left-behind families in rural India.

Addressing these gaps, the present study synthesizes evidence from nationally representative datasets, government reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship to develop a holistic understanding of migration-induced family vulnerability. By integrating diverse dimensions of household well-being within a unified theoretical framework, the study contributes to ongoing debates on migration, development, and social protection while generating policy-relevant insights for promoting inclusive and family-centred migration governance in India.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)** methodology to critically examine the socioeconomic, educational, health, psychosocial, and gendered consequences of internal migration on left-behind families in rural India. Systematic reviews have become increasingly important in social science research because they provide a rigorous, transparent, and replicable process for synthesizing existing knowledge and identifying research gaps (Snyder, 2019). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, systematic reviews follow predefined procedures for literature identification, selection, evaluation, and synthesis, thereby reducing researcher bias and enhancing the reliability of findings (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

The review is guided by the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020)** framework, which has emerged as the international standard for conducting evidence-based reviews across social and behavioural sciences (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA approach enables researchers to systematically document each stage of the review process, including identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies. By adopting this framework, the present study ensures methodological transparency and facilitates future replication.

3.2 Data Sources and Literature Identification

To ensure comprehensive coverage of migration-related scholarship, literature was collected from multiple academic databases and institutional repositories. The search process incorporated peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, government reports, and publications from international organizations. Major databases included Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar.

In addition to academic literature, nationally representative datasets and official reports were consulted to contextualize migration patterns and household outcomes. These sources included the Census of India (2011), National Sample Survey (NSS) migration rounds, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), India Human Development Survey (IHDS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS), publications of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Bank.

The use of multiple databases and data repositories enhanced the breadth of evidence and minimized the likelihood of publication bias, thereby strengthening the validity of the review findings (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

3.3 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically using combinations of keywords related to migration, left-behind family members, and welfare outcomes. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine search results and maximize relevance.

Table 1: Search Strategy and Keywords

Theme	Keywords Used
Migration	Internal Migration, Labour Migration, Circular Migration, Seasonal Migration, Rural–Urban Migration, Interstate Migration
Family	Left-Behind Families, Migrant Households, Left-Behind Women, Left-Behind Children, Elderly Left Behind
Outcomes	Education, Health, Gender Relations, Mental Health, Well-being, Social Vulnerability, Care Burden
Geography	India, Rural India, Developing Countries

To capture both foundational and contemporary scholarship, studies published between **2005 and 2026** were considered. The selected timeframe encompasses major developments in India's migration landscape, including increasing urbanization, labour mobility, and post-pandemic migration transitions.

3.4 Eligibility Criteria

A set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed to ensure consistency and relevance throughout the review process.

Inclusion Criteria

- Empirical studies examining internal migration in India.

- Research focusing on left-behind family members, including women, children, and elderly populations.
- Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles and recognized institutional reports.
- Publications written in English between 2005 and 2026.

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies exclusively addressing international migration.
- Opinion articles, editorials, newspaper reports, and non-scholarly publications.
- Duplicate records.
- Studies lacking empirical evidence.
- Research unrelated to household welfare outcomes.

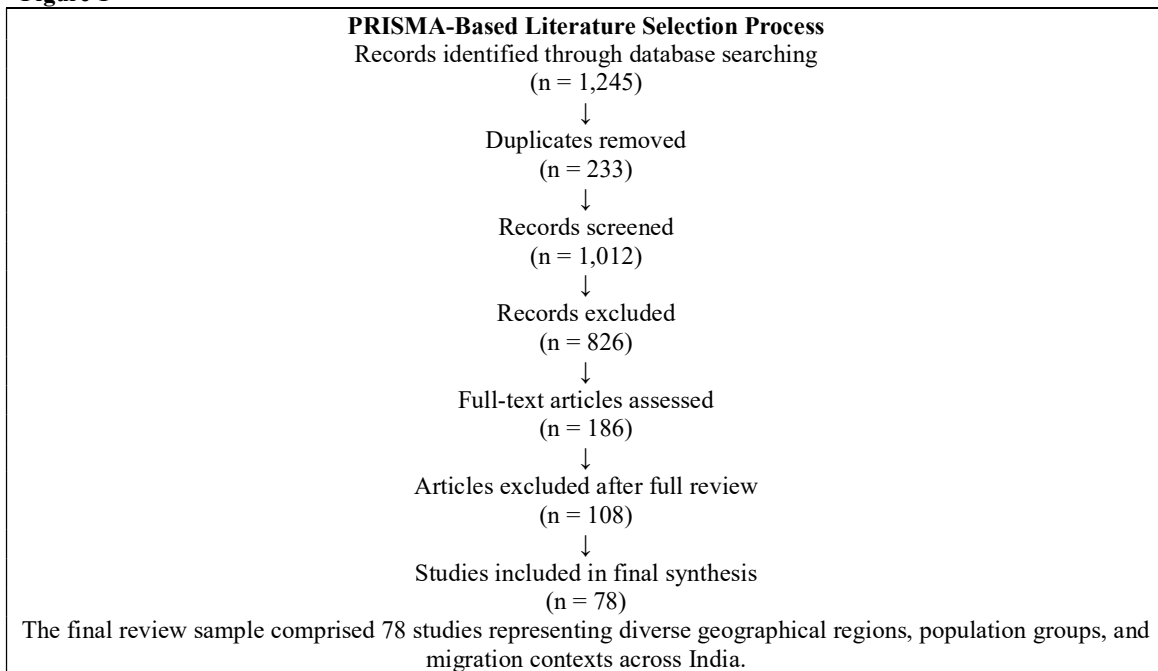
The application of these criteria ensured that the final dataset consisted of studies directly relevant to the objectives of the present research.

3.5 Screening and Selection Procedure

The study followed the PRISMA 2020 protocol during the screening process. Initially, all records identified through database searches were exported into a reference management system. Duplicate records were subsequently removed. Titles and abstracts were screened to assess relevance, followed by full-text evaluation of potentially eligible studies.

The screening process was conducted in four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. This systematic procedure ensured that only studies meeting predefined quality and relevance standards were incorporated into the final synthesis (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1



3.6 Data Extraction and Analytical Framework

A structured data extraction protocol was developed to ensure consistency across studies. Information was systematically recorded regarding publication characteristics, geographical focus, sample size, methodological approach, data sources, key findings, and policy implications.

Following extraction, the studies were subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic synthesis is particularly useful in migration research because it facilitates the integration of findings from diverse methodological traditions while identifying common patterns and contradictions across studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Five major analytical themes emerged from the literature:

1. Economic Consequences of Migration
2. Educational Outcomes among Left-Behind Children
3. Health and Healthcare Accessibility
4. Gender Relations and Care Responsibilities
5. Psychosocial Well-Being and Social Vulnerability

The thematic approach enabled the development of a comprehensive understanding of how migration affects multiple dimensions of household welfare simultaneously.

3.7 Reliability, Validity, and Quality Assurance

Several measures were adopted to enhance the reliability and validity of the review. First, evidence was collected from multiple high-quality databases and nationally representative surveys. Second, methodological triangulation was employed by integrating quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies. Third, the use of the PRISMA framework enhanced transparency and reproducibility throughout the review process. Furthermore, preference was given to studies published in reputable peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, thereby ensuring a high standard of academic quality. Cross-verification of findings across multiple sources strengthened the credibility and robustness of the conclusions drawn from the review.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study is based exclusively on secondary data and publicly available scholarly literature. Consequently, no direct human participation, interviews, or field surveys were involved, and formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, all data sources were appropriately acknowledged, and the principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsible scholarship were strictly maintained throughout the research process (American Psychological Association, 2020).

4. Results and Thematic Synthesis of Evidence

4.1 Migration and the Transformation of Rural Households

Internal migration has emerged as one of the most significant socioeconomic processes shaping contemporary rural India. While migration is often perceived primarily as a labour market phenomenon, the evidence synthesized in this review suggests that its implications extend far beyond economic mobility. Migration fundamentally restructures family relationships, household responsibilities, patterns of care, and community interactions. The departure of working-age household members creates a complex landscape of opportunities and vulnerabilities for those who remain behind.

The literature consistently demonstrates that migration operates through a dual mechanism. On one hand, migrants contribute to household welfare through remittances, which improve income security and reduce vulnerability to economic shocks. On the other hand, prolonged family separation can disrupt caregiving arrangements, weaken emotional support systems, and increase social and psychological burdens among household members (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Consequently, migration should be understood not merely as a process of labour mobility but as a transformative social phenomenon affecting multiple dimensions of household well-being.

4.2 Economic Consequences: Remittances as a Double-Edged Sword

The most visible and extensively documented benefit of migration is the flow of remittances to rural households. Across India, remittance income has become an increasingly important source of livelihood support, particularly among households residing in economically disadvantaged regions characterized by limited employment opportunities and agricultural uncertainty (Srivastava, 2020).

Evidence from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) and numerous regional studies indicates that remittances contribute significantly to household consumption, housing improvement, asset accumulation, healthcare expenditure, and educational investment (Deshingkar, 2010). For many households, migration functions as a risk diversification strategy, enabling families to maintain consumption levels during periods of crop failure, economic instability, or seasonal unemployment.

Table 2
Positive Economic Effects of Migration on Left-Behind Households

Dimension	Observed Impact
Household Income	Significant increase through remittances
Housing Conditions	Improved housing quality and sanitation
Asset Ownership	Greater acquisition of consumer durables
Healthcare Expenditure	Increased spending on medical treatment
Educational Investment	Enhanced ability to finance schooling
Poverty Reduction	Improved resilience against economic shocks

Source: Author's compilation based on findings reported by Stark and Bloom (1985), Deshingkar (2010), Srivastava (2020), World Bank (2023), and India Human Development Survey (IHDS) studies.

However, the benefits of remittances are not uniformly distributed. Several studies report that poorer households often receive irregular or insufficient remittances due to unstable employment conditions faced by migrants. Moreover, migration may increase household dependence on external income sources, making families vulnerable to labour market disruptions at destination areas (World Bank, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated this vulnerability when millions of migrant workers experienced job losses, resulting in substantial declines in household income among migrant-sending communities (ILO, 2021).

Therefore, while migration undoubtedly contributes to economic advancement, its developmental impact remains contingent upon labour market stability, remittance regularity, and local opportunities for productive investment.

4.3 Educational Outcomes among Left-Behind Children

The educational consequences of migration constitute one of the most debated issues in migration scholarship. The literature reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between migration and children's educational outcomes.

From an economic perspective, remittances frequently enhance educational opportunities by enabling households to finance tuition fees, school supplies, transportation, and private tutoring. Increased financial resources may therefore improve school enrollment and reduce dropout rates among children from migrant households (Bhagat et al., 2020).

Conversely, parental migration may generate adverse educational consequences through the reduction of direct parental supervision and emotional support. Children left behind by migrant parents often experience disruptions in daily routines, decreased academic monitoring, and diminished motivation toward educational achievement (Lu, 2014). These challenges are particularly pronounced when both parents migrate or when caregiving responsibilities are transferred to elderly relatives.

Table 3
Positive and Negative Educational Impacts of Migration

Positive Outcomes	Negative Outcomes
Increased school enrollment	Reduced parental supervision
Better educational expenditure	Emotional distress
Improved access to private schooling	Irregular attendance
Reduced child labour participation	Lower academic performance in some cases

Source: Author's synthesis based on Lu (2014), Bhagat et al. (2020), UNICEF (2019), and studies utilizing IHDS datasets.

The evidence suggests that educational outcomes depend largely upon the quality of caregiving arrangements and the stability of remittance flows. Consequently, migration does not automatically enhance educational achievement; rather, its effects are mediated by family structure, socioeconomic status, and community support systems.

4.4 Health and Psychological Well-Being: The Hidden Costs of Migration

One of the most significant yet underexplored dimensions of migration concerns its impact on health and psychosocial well-being. Although remittances may improve access to healthcare services, migration-induced family separation often generates substantial emotional and psychological challenges for left-behind family members.

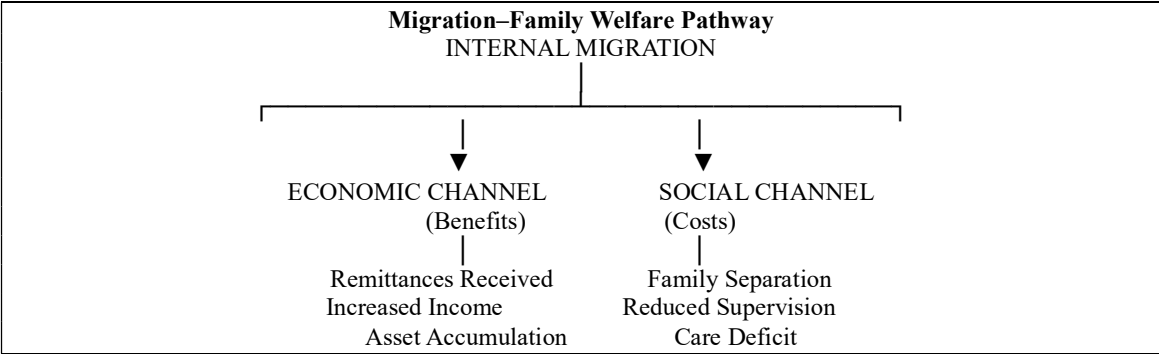
Studies consistently report elevated levels of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and emotional distress among spouses, children, and elderly individuals living in migrant-sending households (Lei et al., 2021). The absence of family members may reduce emotional support, increase uncertainty, and contribute to feelings of social isolation. Elderly parents are particularly vulnerable because migration often weakens traditional intergenerational caregiving arrangements that have historically characterized rural Indian society.

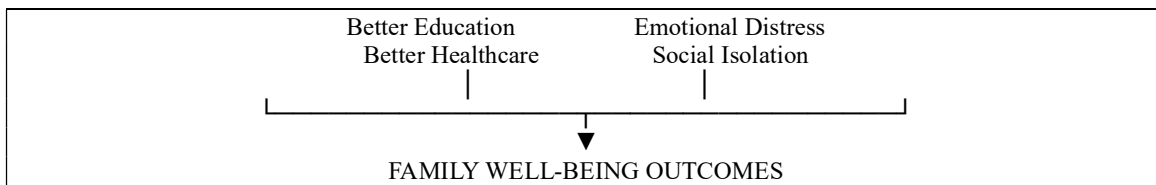
Research further indicates that psychological burdens are frequently gendered. Women left behind by migrant husbands often experience heightened stress resulting from increased household responsibilities, financial uncertainty, and social expectations regarding family management (Gartaula et al., 2012).

Table 4
Health and Psychosocial Outcomes among Left-Behind Family Members

Population Group	Common Outcomes
Children	Anxiety, loneliness, behavioural changes
Women	Stress, emotional burden, fatigue
Elderly	Social isolation, reduced caregiving support
Households Overall	Increased psychosocial vulnerability

Source: Author's compilation based on Lei et al. (2021), Gartaula et al. (2012), Deshingkar and Akter (2009), and WHO migration-related family well-being studies.





Economic Educational Health Gender Psychosocial

Source: Developed by the author based on Stark and Bloom (1985), Putnam (2000), Folbre (2006), and Deshingkar and Akter (2009).

These findings highlight that the social costs of migration cannot be adequately understood through economic indicators alone. Household well-being depends equally upon emotional security, social connectedness, and access to caregiving support.

4.5 Gender Relations and the Feminization of Responsibility

Perhaps the most transformative consequence of migration concerns the reconfiguration of gender roles within rural households. Male out-migration frequently shifts responsibility for agricultural production, household management, childcare, and eldercare onto women who remain behind.

The literature characterizes this process as the “**feminization of responsibility**”, whereby women assume expanded economic and social roles in the absence of migrant family members (Deshingkar, 2018). In many cases, migration increases women's participation in decision-making processes relating to household expenditure, children's education, agricultural management, and community engagement.

Nevertheless, increased authority does not necessarily translate into empowerment. Numerous studies indicate that women's enhanced responsibilities are often accompanied by heavier workloads, greater time poverty, and increased emotional stress (Folbre, 2006). Consequently, migration may simultaneously create opportunities for female agency while reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

The evidence therefore suggests that migration produces a paradoxical outcome: women gain greater responsibility and visibility within household decision-making structures, yet they frequently bear disproportionate social and emotional costs associated with family separation.

4.6 Regional, Caste, and Poverty-Based Inequalities

The consequences of migration are far from uniform across India. Significant variations emerge according to region, caste, class, and household socioeconomic status.

Households located in economically advanced regions often possess better access to banking services, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and employment opportunities, enabling them to convert remittances into sustainable improvements in living standards. Conversely, households residing in economically marginalized regions frequently encounter structural barriers that limit the developmental benefits of migration (Bhagat et al., 2020).

Similarly, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged households often face greater challenges in translating migration-generated income into long-term social mobility due to persistent inequalities in access to resources and public services.

These findings underscore the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when analyzing migration outcomes. The benefits and burdens of migration are shaped not only by household migration status but also by broader social and institutional structures that influence access to opportunities and resources.

4.7 Synthesis of Evidence

The evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that migration generates a complex combination of economic gains and social costs for left-behind families in rural India. While remittances frequently improve household income, educational investment, and healthcare access, family separation may simultaneously increase caregiving burdens, psychological stress, and social vulnerability. Migration therefore functions neither as a purely beneficial nor purely detrimental phenomenon. Rather, its consequences are multidimensional, context-specific, and mediated by household characteristics, gender relations, and institutional support systems.

The findings collectively support the argument that migration should be viewed as a household development strategy whose outcomes extend beyond economic indicators to encompass broader dimensions of social well-being, family cohesion, and human development.

5. Discussion

The findings of this review reveal that internal migration in India is a multidimensional process that simultaneously generates economic opportunities and social vulnerabilities for left-behind family members. While migration has traditionally been viewed as a strategy for income enhancement and poverty reduction, the evidence synthesized in this study suggests that its implications extend far beyond economic considerations. The experiences of women, children, and elderly family members demonstrate that migration reshapes household

structures, caregiving arrangements, educational opportunities, health outcomes, and social relationships in complex and often contradictory ways.

The findings strongly support the propositions of the **New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM)**, which conceptualizes migration as a household-level strategy for managing risk and diversifying income sources (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Across the reviewed studies, remittances emerged as a crucial mechanism through which households improve consumption levels, invest in children's education, access healthcare services, and accumulate productive assets. These findings are consistent with international evidence from developing countries, where migration has been widely recognized as a tool for reducing household vulnerability and promoting socioeconomic mobility (Taylor, 1999; World Bank, 2023).

However, the findings also demonstrate that the benefits of migration are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. The review identified substantial variation across regions, caste groups, income categories, and household structures. This suggests that migration outcomes are shaped not only by remittance flows but also by the broader institutional and social environments in which households operate. Households with greater access to education, healthcare, financial services, and social support networks are generally better positioned to convert migration-generated income into sustainable improvements in well-being. Conversely, marginalized households frequently encounter structural barriers that limit the developmental benefits of migration.

The review further highlights the relevance of **Social Capital Theory** in understanding the social consequences of migration. Although remittances strengthen economic capital, prolonged separation between migrants and family members may weaken social capital through the disruption of family relationships, caregiving arrangements, and emotional support systems (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The findings indicate that children, women, and elderly family members often experience emotional stress, loneliness, and reduced access to social support in the absence of migrant household members. These outcomes illustrate that financial resources cannot fully substitute for the social and emotional functions performed by family relationships.

Particularly significant is the evidence relating to left-behind children. While increased household income frequently improves access to educational resources, parental absence may simultaneously undermine academic performance and psychosocial well-being. Similar findings have been reported in studies conducted in China, where parental migration has been associated with both educational benefits and emotional challenges among left-behind children (Wen & Lin, 2012). The Indian evidence therefore reflects a broader global pattern in which migration generates competing influences on child development. The ultimate outcome appears to depend upon the quality of caregiving arrangements, the duration of parental absence, and the availability of institutional support mechanisms.

The findings concerning women provide further evidence of migration's contradictory consequences. Male out-migration often results in increased decision-making authority, greater financial responsibility, and enhanced participation in household management. These changes may contribute to certain forms of female empowerment, particularly in contexts where women traditionally possess limited autonomy. However, the review also demonstrates that empowerment is frequently accompanied by increased workloads, caregiving responsibilities, and psychological stress. These findings align with the **Care Economy Framework**, which emphasizes the unequal distribution of unpaid care work within households and the hidden costs associated with caregiving responsibilities (Folbre, 2006). Consequently, migration may simultaneously challenge and reinforce existing gender inequalities.

The experiences of elderly family members represent another critical dimension of migration's social impact. Traditional family support systems remain central to elderly well-being in rural India, where formal social protection mechanisms often remain inadequate. The migration of adult children can therefore reduce access to daily care, emotional companionship, and healthcare assistance. Similar patterns have been documented in Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and other migrant-sending societies, suggesting that the challenges faced by left-behind elderly populations constitute a broader developmental concern across Asia (UNESCAP, 2022). These findings underscore the need to incorporate ageing and caregiving considerations into migration policy frameworks.

An important contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating that migration should not be conceptualized solely in terms of economic outcomes. Much of the existing literature has focused on remittances, poverty reduction, and labour mobility, often neglecting the social, emotional, and caregiving dimensions of migration. The findings suggest that migration produces a complex trade-off between material improvement and social disruption. While economic gains may enhance household resilience, social costs may simultaneously reduce overall well-being. This duality helps explain why empirical studies frequently report conflicting findings regarding the consequences of migration.

The study also contributes to ongoing debates concerning migration and development. Traditional development perspectives often assume that migration generates universally positive outcomes through increased income and investment. However, the evidence reviewed here indicates that migration's developmental consequences are highly contingent upon household characteristics, gender relations, institutional support systems, and community resources. Development outcomes therefore depend not merely on the movement of labour but on the social and institutional contexts within which migration occurs.

Overall, the findings support a more holistic understanding of migration that recognizes both its economic benefits and its social costs. Such an approach moves beyond simplistic narratives of migration as either a solution to poverty or a source of family disruption. Instead, migration should be understood as a dynamic social process that reshapes multiple dimensions of household life and produces outcomes that are simultaneously beneficial, challenging, and context dependent.

Suggested Additional Table for Discussion

Country	Common Positive Outcomes	Common Negative Outcomes
India	Remittances, education investment	Care burden, emotional stress
China	Income growth, schooling support	Mental health concerns
Nepal	Poverty reduction	Elderly isolation
Bangladesh	Improved household consumption	Women's increased workload
Vietnam	Better living standards	Family separation effects

Source: Author's synthesis based on international migration literature (World Bank, 2023; UNESCAP, 2022; Wen & Lin, 2012)

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this review indicate that migration is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental to rural households. Rather, its consequences are mediated by the availability of institutional support, social protection mechanisms, educational opportunities, healthcare infrastructure, and community resources. While migration contributes significantly to household income and poverty reduction, it simultaneously generates challenges related to caregiving, psychosocial well-being, gender inequality, and social vulnerability. Consequently, migration policy must move beyond a narrow focus on labour mobility and remittances to embrace a broader family-centred approach that safeguards the welfare of left-behind populations.

6.1 Strengthening Social Protection for Left-Behind Families

One of the most consistent findings emerging from the review is the vulnerability of women, children, and elderly individuals who remain in migrant-sending households. Existing welfare programmes often target migrants or economically disadvantaged households without explicitly addressing the unique challenges faced by left-behind family members. Therefore, social protection systems should incorporate migration-sensitive components designed specifically for households experiencing prolonged family separation.

Government initiatives such as pension schemes, health insurance programmes, food security measures, and direct benefit transfers should prioritize migrant-sending households with vulnerable dependents. Special attention should be given to elderly individuals who frequently experience reduced caregiving support following the migration of adult children. Strengthening social protection mechanisms would not only reduce household vulnerability but also enhance the developmental benefits generated through migration.

6.2 Promoting Educational Support for Left-Behind Children

The review demonstrates that migration has mixed consequences for children's educational outcomes. Although remittances frequently increase educational investment, parental absence may negatively affect academic performance, emotional well-being, and school attendance. These findings highlight the importance of targeted educational interventions aimed at supporting children from migrant households.

Schools in high-migration regions should establish counselling services, mentoring programmes, and academic support initiatives specifically designed for left-behind children. Teachers should receive training to identify emotional and behavioural challenges associated with parental migration. Furthermore, digital communication platforms could be utilized to facilitate regular interaction between migrant parents and their children, thereby strengthening family relationships and educational engagement.

Table 6

Policy Measures for Supporting Left-Behind Children

Challenge	Recommended Intervention
Reduced parental supervision	School mentoring programmes
Emotional distress	Counselling and psychological support
Irregular attendance	Community-based monitoring
Educational disadvantage	Scholarship and tutoring schemes

Source: Author's recommendations based on Lu (2014), UNICEF (2019), and Bhagat et al. (2020).

6.3 Addressing Gendered Care Burdens

The evidence reviewed in this study highlights the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities assumed by women in migrant-sending households. While migration may increase women's decision-making authority, it frequently results in greater workloads, time poverty, and emotional stress. Consequently, migration policy should recognize and address the gendered dimensions of household adaptation.

Local governments and community organizations should expand access to childcare facilities, elderly care services, labour-saving technologies, and women's self-help groups. Such interventions would reduce unpaid care

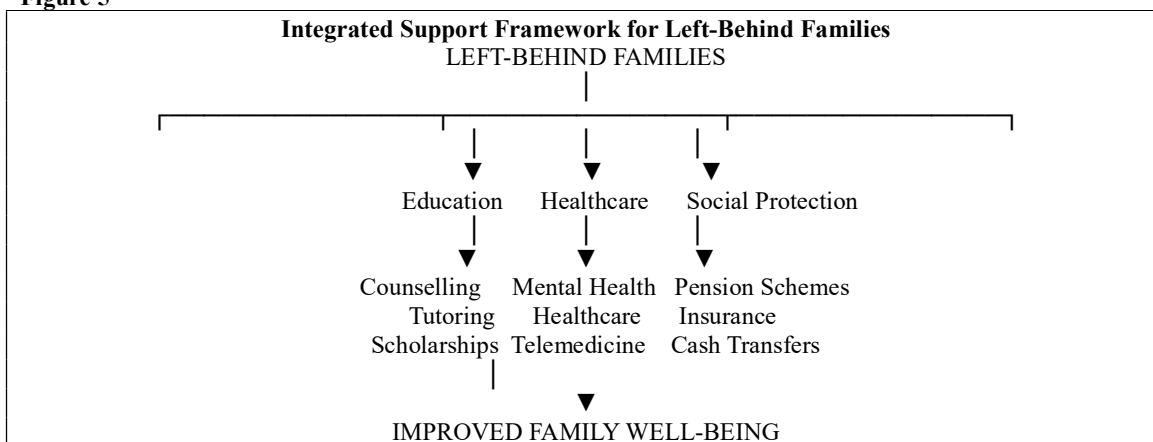
burdens and enable women to participate more fully in economic and community activities. In addition, financial literacy programmes and entrepreneurship support initiatives could enhance women's economic autonomy and strengthen their capacity to manage remittance income productively.

6.4 Expanding Rural Healthcare and Mental Health Services

The review identifies significant psychosocial challenges among left-behind family members, including anxiety, loneliness, stress, and social isolation. Despite growing recognition of mental health as a critical development issue, mental health services remain limited in many rural areas of India.

Migration-sensitive healthcare policies should therefore integrate mental health support within existing primary healthcare systems. Community health workers, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), and local health centres could play an important role in identifying vulnerable individuals and facilitating access to counselling services. Telemedicine and digital healthcare platforms may further improve accessibility in geographically remote areas.

Figure 5



Source: Developed by the author based on the findings of the present study.

6.5 Improving Migration Governance

The developmental impact of migration depends not only on conditions in migrant-sending communities but also on the quality of migration governance. Many migrant workers continue to face challenges related to informal employment, wage insecurity, lack of social security coverage, and limited access to legal protection. These vulnerabilities directly affect the well-being of left-behind family members through unstable remittance flows and economic uncertainty.

Policy efforts should focus on strengthening labour market regulation, improving access to formal employment contracts, expanding portability of social security benefits, and facilitating secure remittance transfer mechanisms. Enhanced migration governance would increase economic stability for migrant households and reduce the risks associated with labour mobility.

6.6 Developing a Comprehensive Migration-Family Policy Framework

Current migration policies often focus exclusively on migrants themselves while neglecting the experiences of family members who remain at the place of origin. The findings of this review suggest the need for a more integrated policy framework that recognizes migration as a family and community phenomenon rather than solely an individual economic decision.

Such a framework should incorporate:

- Family-centred social protection programmes.
- Migration-sensitive educational policies.
- Gender-responsive care support systems.
- Mental health and psychosocial services.
- Inclusive labour migration governance.
- Improved data collection on left-behind populations.

By integrating these components, policymakers can maximize the developmental benefits of migration while minimizing its social costs.

6.7 Toward Inclusive and Sustainable Migration

Ultimately, the evidence reviewed in this study suggests that migration should be viewed as a critical component of rural development rather than merely a response to economic hardship. When supported by effective institutions, social protection systems, and inclusive governance structures, migration can contribute significantly

to poverty reduction, human capital development, and household resilience. However, achieving these outcomes requires policies that address not only the needs of migrants but also the welfare of the families they leave behind. A sustainable migration strategy must therefore balance economic mobility with social protection, ensuring that the pursuit of opportunity does not come at the expense of family well-being and social cohesion.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

7.1 Limitations of the Study

Despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence regarding the consequences of internal migration for left-behind families in rural India, the present study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, the study relies exclusively on secondary data sources and previously published literature. Although systematic literature reviews provide valuable insights by integrating findings from multiple studies, they are inherently dependent upon the quality, scope, and methodological rigor of the underlying research. Consequently, any limitations present in the original studies may influence the conclusions of the present review (Snyder, 2019). Second, the reviewed literature exhibits substantial methodological diversity. The studies included in the review employ quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches, utilize different datasets, and focus on varying geographical regions and population groups. While this diversity enriches the overall understanding of migration outcomes, it may also complicate direct comparison across studies. Differences in sampling strategies, measurement techniques, and analytical methods may contribute to variations in reported findings.

Third, much of the available evidence concerning left-behind families in India remains regionally concentrated. Several studies focus on specific states or migration corridors, particularly in areas characterized by high levels of labour migration. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of households residing in other regions with distinct socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional contexts. The heterogeneity of migration patterns across India suggests that migration outcomes may vary considerably according to regional conditions. A further limitation relates to the availability of nationally representative migration data. Although the Census of India, NSS, PLFS, and IHDS provide important information regarding migration and household welfare, comprehensive longitudinal data specifically focused on left-behind family members remain limited. As a result, establishing causal relationships between migration and household outcomes remains challenging. Many existing studies identify associations between migration and various welfare indicators but cannot conclusively determine causation due to issues such as selection bias and unobserved household characteristics (Taylor, 1999).

The review is also constrained by language and publication considerations. Only studies published in English and accessible through selected academic databases were included. Consequently, relevant evidence contained in regional-language publications, unpublished dissertations, government reports, or grey literature may not have been captured. This may introduce publication bias, as studies reporting significant findings are generally more likely to be published than those reporting null or inconclusive results (Page et al., 2021).

Another important limitation concerns the rapidly changing nature of migration dynamics in India. The majority of large-scale migration datasets continue to rely on information collected prior to or during the early stages of major socioeconomic transformations, including accelerated urbanization, digitalization, labour market restructuring, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments have significantly altered migration patterns, remittance behaviour, and household coping strategies. Consequently, some findings reported in earlier studies may not fully reflect contemporary migration realities.

Finally, migration is a complex social process influenced by multiple interacting factors, including gender, caste, class, age, education, social networks, and institutional conditions. While the present review attempts to synthesize evidence across these dimensions, it is difficult to fully capture the complexity and contextual specificity of migration experiences through secondary analysis alone. The outcomes associated with migration often vary according to household characteristics and local circumstances, making broad generalizations challenging.

7.2 Future Research Directions

The limitations identified above point toward several promising directions for future research.

First, there is a pressing need for longitudinal studies that track left-behind family members over extended periods. Such studies would enable researchers to better understand how migration influences household welfare across different stages of the life course and would facilitate stronger causal inference regarding migration outcomes. Longitudinal evidence is particularly important for examining the long-term educational, psychological, and socioeconomic effects of parental migration on children.

Second, future research should place greater emphasis on the psychosocial dimensions of migration. Although economic impacts have received considerable scholarly attention, comparatively less research has focused on emotional well-being, mental health, loneliness, family relationships, and social isolation among left-behind populations. Given the increasing recognition of mental health as a critical development issue, further investigation into these dimensions is urgently required.

Third, more gender-sensitive research is needed to understand the evolving roles of women within migrant-sending households. Existing evidence suggests that migration simultaneously generates opportunities for empowerment and sources of vulnerability. Future studies should explore how these processes vary across

different social groups, regions, and household structures, with particular attention to intersections between gender, caste, and class.

Fourth, future research should examine the experiences of elderly individuals in greater depth. Population ageing is becoming increasingly significant in India, and migration may have profound implications for intergenerational support systems. Additional research is required to understand how migration affects healthcare access, caregiving arrangements, social participation, and quality of life among older adults.

Fifth, comparative and cross-national studies would substantially enrich migration scholarship. Comparing India's experience with that of other migrant-sending countries such as China, Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and the Philippines could help identify common patterns and context-specific differences. Such comparisons would contribute to the development of broader theoretical frameworks concerning migration and family well-being.

Sixth, future studies should explore the implications of digital technologies and communication platforms for migrant families. Advances in mobile communication, digital banking, online education, and telemedicine may significantly influence how left-behind households experience migration. Understanding the role of digital connectivity could provide important insights into contemporary forms of family resilience and adaptation.

Finally, future research should increasingly adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate perspectives from sociology, economics, psychology, public health, gender studies, and development studies. Given the multidimensional nature of migration, interdisciplinary scholarship is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of its consequences for families and communities.

In summary, while the present study contributes to existing knowledge by synthesizing evidence concerning left-behind families in rural India, it also highlights important gaps that warrant further investigation. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for advancing migration scholarship and informing evidence-based policies aimed at enhancing the well-being of migrant households and their communities.

8. Conclusion

Migration has long been recognized as a defining feature of socioeconomic transformation in developing countries. In India, internal migration has become an increasingly important livelihood strategy through which millions of households seek to overcome poverty, unemployment, agricultural uncertainty, and regional inequalities. While the economic dimensions of migration have received substantial scholarly attention, the experiences of those who remain behind have often remained at the margins of migration research. This study sought to address that gap by providing a comprehensive synthesis of evidence concerning the socioeconomic, educational, health, psychosocial, and gendered consequences of internal migration for left-behind families in rural India.

The findings reveal that migration constitutes a complex and multidimensional process whose consequences extend far beyond labour mobility and income generation. Consistent with the propositions of the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), migration functions as a household strategy for risk diversification and income enhancement. Remittances emerged as a critical mechanism through which migrant households improve consumption levels, invest in education and healthcare, accumulate productive assets, and enhance their resilience to economic shocks (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Taylor, 1999). For many rural households, migration represents an important pathway toward improved living standards and socioeconomic mobility.

However, the review also demonstrates that migration is accompanied by significant social costs. The departure of working-age family members frequently disrupts caregiving arrangements, weakens emotional support systems, and alters household structures. These changes create new forms of vulnerability for women, children, and elderly family members who remain in migrant-sending communities. The evidence indicates that the benefits derived from remittances often coexist with challenges related to social isolation, psychological stress, increased caregiving responsibilities, and reduced access to direct family support. Consequently, migration cannot be understood solely through economic indicators; its broader social implications are equally important in shaping household well-being.

One of the central contributions of this study lies in highlighting the contradictory nature of migration outcomes. The review reveals that migration simultaneously generates opportunities and constraints, empowerment and vulnerability, inclusion and exclusion. For example, increased remittance income may enhance educational investment and household consumption, yet parental absence may negatively affect children's emotional well-being and academic performance. Similarly, women left behind often gain greater decision-making authority and financial responsibility, but these gains are frequently accompanied by increased workloads, time poverty, and psychological strain. Such findings underscore the need to move beyond simplistic interpretations of migration as either beneficial or harmful and instead recognize its inherently complex and context-dependent nature.

The study also contributes to theoretical debates concerning migration and development. By integrating insights from the New Economics of Labour Migration, Social Capital Theory, and the Care Economy Framework, the paper demonstrates that migration affects households through both economic and social pathways. While remittances strengthen financial capital, migration may simultaneously weaken social capital by reducing opportunities for caregiving, emotional support, and interpersonal interaction (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

These findings suggest that migration should be conceptualized as a transformative social process that reshapes family relationships, gender roles, and community dynamics rather than merely a mechanism for labour allocation. Another important finding concerns the unequal distribution of migration outcomes across social groups. The review indicates that the consequences of migration vary according to region, caste, class, gender, age, and access to institutional support. Households possessing greater educational resources, stronger social networks, and better access to public services are generally more capable of converting remittances into long-term developmental gains. Conversely, economically marginalized households often face structural barriers that limit the benefits of migration and amplify its social costs. These disparities highlight the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when examining migration and household welfare.

The policy implications of the study are equally significant. Existing migration policies frequently focus on migrants themselves while neglecting the experiences of left-behind family members. The evidence synthesized in this review suggests that migration governance must adopt a more inclusive and family-centred approach. Strengthening social protection systems, expanding educational support programmes, improving access to healthcare and mental health services, reducing gendered care burdens, and enhancing labour migration governance are all essential for maximizing the benefits of migration while minimizing its adverse consequences. Policymakers must recognize that migration is not solely an economic phenomenon but also a social process with profound implications for family well-being and community development.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of viewing migration within the broader framework of sustainable and inclusive development. Migration can contribute significantly to poverty reduction, human capital formation, and household resilience when supported by effective institutions and social protection mechanisms. However, the developmental potential of migration cannot be fully realized if the needs of left-behind populations remain overlooked. Ensuring the well-being of women, children, and elderly family members is therefore not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes.

In conclusion, the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that the invisible costs of mobility are as important as its visible economic benefits. While migration undoubtedly provides opportunities for income generation and socioeconomic advancement, it also produces substantial social, emotional, and caregiving challenges for those who remain behind. The experiences of left-behind families reveal that migration is fundamentally a family and community phenomenon rather than merely an individual economic decision. Recognizing and addressing these multidimensional consequences is essential for developing more inclusive migration policies and promoting balanced development in rural India.

Ultimately, the future of migration policy must move beyond a narrow emphasis on labour mobility and remittances toward a broader commitment to human well-being, social cohesion, and family resilience. Only by acknowledging both the opportunities and vulnerabilities associated with migration can policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners ensure that mobility contributes not merely to economic growth but also to the creation of more equitable, supportive, and sustainable societies.

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