



## Gendered Impact of Labor Migration: A Study on the Left-Behind Wives' Decision-Making Abilities in Bangladesh

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the complex relationship between male labor migration and women's empowerment in Bangladesh, with a focus on the decision-making abilities and autonomy of left-behind wives. In patriarchal societies, men typically dominate household decisions, but their migration offers women opportunities for increased independence and responsibility. However, this shift is complex, as women often remain dependent on their husbands for emotional and economic support, and men continue to influence decisions remotely. Being done from a qualitative methodology and using the 'empowerment theory' of Naila Kabeer, this study reveals that multiple intersecting factors beyond access to remittances and education influence women's empowerment. Geographic origin, family structure, and persistent patriarchal norms significantly impact wives' ability to make autonomous decisions. While some women, particularly in nuclear families, gain increased control over resources and decision-making, others face restricted mobility and limited control over remittances, especially in extended families. The research also reveals emerging opportunities for economic independence through home-based businesses, which are often constrained by gender-based wage discrimination and social restrictions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how transnational migration intersects with existing social structures to shape women's empowerment in patriarchal societies.

**Keywords:** *Left-Behind Wives; Women's Empowerment; Patriarchal Norms; Decision-Making Autonomy; Men's Labor Migration*

### **Introduction**

In patriarchal societies, the dynamics of decision-making and household management are intricately linked to gender roles, often privileging male authority and undermining women's autonomy. However, the migration of men for labor—a prevalent phenomenon in many parts of the world, including Bangladesh—introduces a unique shift in this dynamic. When a man migrates, leaving the family behind,

his wife usually becomes the new head of the house, offering opportunities for increased responsibility and autonomy. However, being a female household head is not an easy task in a patriarchal society, especially in rural areas of Bangladesh. Women often receive the money sent by their husbands; however, decisions about spending the money and other crucial family matters might be regulated by their husbands because women were not used to holding that sort of power in decision-making previously, while husbands stayed at home. Studies on male migrant left-behind wives' situation suggest that rural left-behind women have to take responsibility for caring for their families, childbearing, and agricultural production (Ye 2016). As to gender relations, even when they have migrated, men still control family decisions, via cell phone conversations, especially decisions related to investments in production. So, left-behind women are still seen as secondary, and migrant men have the role of managers while their wives play the role of producers. In this case, wives who stay behind have the double burden of housework and maintaining families and are dependent on men for both emotional and economic support; these relations relegate women to a subordinate position to men (Jiang and Zhou 2007).

However, considering the family dynamics and understanding between couples, the situation can be different for many women, resulting in a great scope for them to practice autonomy. For some women, their husbands' migration has left more room to control family resources, especially those from agricultural production and family income, and increased engagement in agriculture has eventually improved their position (Meng, 1993). In addition, left-behind women are compelled to take on activities outside their families, such as village public affairs or community decision-making, which in turn gives them a larger public space in which to perform. Moreover, women's unpaid housework gradually becomes visible when their husbands migrate and becomes an indispensable contribution to the family, which improves their status in the family and village (Zhou 2014).

Depending on the experiences of left-behind wives in terms of controlling household resources, engaging in community affairs, and making decisions independently, the impact of labor migration on the left-behind wives' decision-making ability can either be positive or negative. If the wives can make decisions about crucial activities or activities that have a significant impact on the family and their lives, they are marked as positive changes. Being household heads, husbands are used to making all significant decisions in families of a patriarchal society. However, in their absence, wives become the new household heads, yet they tend to rely on the husband who is abroad to make decisions in the family and personal life. At the same time, their husbands can consistently pressure or manipulate them to make decisions that are beneficial for the husband, although they are living abroad. This tendency is considered to be the negative dimension in terms of the decision-making ability of wives. The ability to make decisions is important because if someone does not have the freedom to make their own decisions and take part in significant family decisions, it certainly denotes the unequal and disempowered position of the person (Pratto 2016).

The decision-making in the family, once dominated by men, can be turned into a couple's decision. It is evident in the migration literature that the incidence of male labor migration has been huge in Bangladesh for decades. Men migrate, leaving their wives and other family members behind. Following the departure of men, left behind, women tend to play a vital role in family management without their husbands. They have to take care of all the family members and perform the role of both father & mother. However, the experience of all left-behind wives is not similar. The coping mechanism of left-behind wives varies from person to person and family to family. Studies show that wives with higher education tend to be more confident in making life choices, and they can spend the remittance money well (Sabur and Mahmud 2008). In Bangladesh, where male labor migration has been a widespread phenomenon for decades, the role of left-behind wives in managing families has become increasingly significant. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on examining the left-behind wives' decision-making ability in different aspects of life in the absence of husbands. By exploring their autonomy, mobility, freedom to utilize resources, and participation in significant family decisions, the research seeks to illuminate the diverse coping mechanisms and experiences of these women.

## ***Literature Review***

In Bangladesh, men often intend to migrate for better work opportunities, and it has been a popular tendency among middle and lower-income families for decades. Following the migration of the husbands, in nuclear families, wives become the new household head, and the previous family structure changes accordingly. Performing the role of the household head brings new challenges to the lives of the wives left behind by labor migrants, as they were not accustomed to performing this role previously (Gaetano 2015). As the study shows, the migration of one or more family members influences the way the family functions. The absence of particular family members, either on a permanent or temporary basis, influences the family structure, both in destination and origin areas (Hugo 1987). According to a study conducted in the rural areas of Myanmar, the international migration of husbands has a strong and positive impact on left-behind wives' autonomy independent of individual characteristics and household social and economic status (Shwe et al. 2020:56). Gulati (1993) examined that, the empowerment of women can be expressed in terms of decision-making power from the perspectives of health, mobility, and household purchases as well as access to work and education. Male migration leads to modification in the structure of family life and also transforms women's social and economic position, often to their detriment. The absence of the migrant from the household, especially if he is the head of the family, can have serious implications for the women left behind, both socially and economically (Sekher 1997).

Women may gain autonomy through the absence of men; however, they are left with greater stress and vulnerability, an increased workload, and a high chance of extended family intervention (Shaheed 1981). Having access to or even control of the remitted money does not always mean the wife is in a better position. Rather, they are imposed with a bundle of responsibilities they have never performed in most cases. Reports of IOM state that during the migration phase, while the husbands are abroad, the spouses left behind frequently become the *de facto* head of the household and, as a result, experience an increase in their decision-making power. They have to make not only everyday decisions but crucial decisions as well, such as where to send the children for schooling or which doctor to go to when they are ill. However, it is important to note that the wife becomes the *de facto* head of the household only when she is economically empowered. The woman's decision-making power often returns to its original level (pre-migration stage) when her husband returns home, even for a short vacation. Sabur and Mahmud (2008) found that there was a positive correlation between women's remittance-receiving and decision-making power at the household level. However, every woman does not have equal access to remittances. The educational status of women also plays an important role in handling remittances from their migrant husbands (Lopez-Ekra et al. 2011). Those who are more educated are more likely to handle/control the remittances compared to those who are less educated. The educational qualifications of wives are determined as an important factor in acting as autonomous decision-makers to have access and control over the utilization of resources. It was noticed that as the wife's education level increased, their participation in decision-making in the absence of her husband increased as well.

Besides, wives' decision-making ability is considered to be influenced by their access to and control of remittances. There is a positive relation between remittances received by wives from their husbands and the capacity of the wives to make household and economic decisions in the family. Proper education and direct access to wives' remittances lead to women's full empowerment in the family (Sabur and Mahmud 2008). Apart from that, significant life changes happen to wives regarding their engagement with local and national organizations in their husbands' absence. As Yabiku (2010) explained, left-behind women start interacting with organizations and institutions such as banks and government agencies that they might not have used before. While studies on labor migration have explored its economic implications and social consequences, the extent to which left-behind wives exercise agency, make independent decisions, and manage resources remains underexplored. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only to appreciate the transformative potential of migration but also to identify the barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in households and communities. Keeping this objective in mind, this study wishes to explore the status of labor migrants' left-behind wives' decision-making power in terms of

accessing and utilizing the remittance sent by their husbands, their autonomy, and mobility. Building on the aforementioned literature, this study seeks to frame its analysis within Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory. Empowerment is not merely about economic improvement but the overall development of a human. As Naila Kabeer (2005) mentioned in her study,

*Empowerment refers to the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices. To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability.*

Agency is practiced through the use of 'resources'. And resources are distributed through different institutions in a society where certain people hold privileged positions due to their hierarchy. Resources are the elements that are used to bring a people's power position into reality. As Kabeer mentioned in her study, "Resources and agency make up people's capabilities; that is, their potential for living the life they want." The final stage is referred to as 'achievements', where people have the realization of the outcome of practising agency through the use of resources. One can be called empowered when one gets a sense of independence at this stage, rather than meeting survival needs. As discussed above, empowerment is all about having decision-making ability. Kabeer (2005) explains certain indicators of the ability to make choices based on the contexts of different countries of the world. For women in Bangladesh, the specific sectors mentioned in the study are the ability to make small and large consumer purchases, house repairs, taking in livestock for raising, leasing of land, and purchase of major assets. Children's education, visits to friends and relatives, household purchases, and health care matters.

## Research Methodology

This study aims to explore the left-behind wives' status on decision-making ability in different aspects of their lives after their husbands' migration. To bring insights into this topic and understand the wives' perceptions, this study will follow the qualitative methodology with one-to-one qualitative interviews serving as the primary method of data collection. As a secondary source of data, different kinds of literature of existing research have been used along with relevant articles, ILO, and IOM reports to evaluate the context and facts of the study. This study was conducted in Shilkhali, a village from Pukua Upazila under the district of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. This is one of the areas of Upazila where labor migration abroad is very common. Purposive sampling has been used to select the respondents suitable for this research. The total number of participants is 15, among them, 7 participants are from nuclear families and 8 participants are from extended families. Participants were chosen from different family patterns and age distinctions, mostly so that the experiences of wives from different contexts could be explored to better understand their diverse perspectives. Analysis was done both during and after data collection. Interviews were recorded using mobile phone software with prior permission. The main analysis was done after data collection by listening to and transcribing interview recordings. After transcribing, the data were conceptually coded, organized, compared, and interrelated until data saturation was found. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic information of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Research Participants.

| Name          | Age | Household pattern | Education level | Husband's living location | Departure Duration | No of children |
|---------------|-----|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Jibonara      | 34  | Nuclear           | Class 6         | UAE                       | 16                 | 3              |
| Fatema        | 24  | Nuclear           | HSC             | UAE                       | 7                  | 2              |
| Monoara Begum | 25  | Nuclear           | SSC             | KSA                       | 4                  | 2              |
| Sayeda Khatun | 35  | Nuclear           | Class 8         | Oman                      | 9                  | 2              |
| Munni         | 33  | Nuclear           | Class 8         | KSA                       | 15                 | 3              |

|                    |    |          |         |          |    |   |
|--------------------|----|----------|---------|----------|----|---|
| <b>Meena</b>       | 26 | Nuclear  | HSC     | Malaysia | 5  | 2 |
| <b>Julekha</b>     | 31 | Nuclear  | Class 7 | KSA      | 11 | 3 |
| <b>Salma</b>       | 27 | Extended | HSC     | KSA      | 8  | 2 |
| <b>Farida Banu</b> | 29 | Extended | Class 9 | Libya    | 8  | 3 |
| <b>Marriyam</b>    | 40 | Extended | N/A     | UAE      | 19 | 4 |
| <b>Shaila</b>      | 27 | Extended | SSC     | Qatar    | 5  | 2 |
| <b>Bilkis</b>      | 25 | Extended | SSC     | Oman     | 7  | 1 |
| <b>Sumaiya</b>     | 28 | Extended | SSC     | Qatar    | 4  | 2 |
| <b>Setu</b>        | 26 | Extended | HSC     | KSA      | 5  | 1 |
| <b>Rahima</b>      | 32 | Extended | SSC     | UAE      | 12 | 2 |

## Findings

### Dynamics of Family Decision-Making among Left-Behind Wives

The research findings reveal complex patterns in decision-making abilities among left-behind wives, with notable variations based on household structure, age, and educational background. The analysis demonstrates that these factors significantly influence wives' autonomy in family decisions, particularly regarding children's upbringing and asset management.

### Decision-Making in Child-Rearing

#### Educational Decision-Making

The study reveals a distinct dichotomy between critical and non-critical decisions in children's education. Wives in nuclear families demonstrated greater autonomy in routine educational decisions, though this autonomy remained constrained within traditional patriarchal boundaries. For instance, Jibonara's experience illustrates this limited independence: *"When my first child became 6, I thought of admitting him to school... my husband encouraged me to take necessary steps for the schooling of our son."* This account reflects how wives can initiate educational decisions, yet still seek validation from absent husbands. However, the effectiveness of maternal authority in children's education presents significant challenges. Rahima's narrative poignantly illustrates this struggle: *"I can't control my kids as I have a little say over their lives. While their father was home, they used to be seated at study tables... Now my son comes home around 10 PM and barely sits to study."* This testimony reveals how paternal absence can undermine maternal authority, leading to behavioral challenges among children.

### Behavioral Management and Social Control:

The research uncovered a concerning pattern regarding behavioral management in father-absent households. Julekha's account of her son's involvement in gambling and fighting exemplifies the erosion of parental control: *"My son does not listen to single words... Last month, he was involved in a fight regarding gambling in a cricket match."* This situation often leads to drastic measures, as evidenced by the increasing trend of sending young sons abroad as laborers, sometimes through questionable means, as illustrated by Sayeda Khatun's experience with falsifying her son's age documents. Interestingly, extended family structures appeared to provide additional mechanisms of social control. Farida Banu's observation that his uncle's presence regulates her son's behavior suggests that extended family networks can partially compensate for paternal absence in maintaining social order.

## Decisions Regarding Children's Marriage

The study reveals persistent patriarchal influences in marriage-related decision-making, though with some variation in operational aspects. While major decisions about spouse selection remain primarily in males, wives often gain agency in ceremonial arrangements. Shaila's experience exemplifies this dynamic: *"My husband, male members of my in-laws, mainly choose the groom... But my husband gave me the choice to make jewellery according to my choice for my daughter."* This indicates a gendered division in marriage-related decision-making, where women's authority is limited to traditionally feminine domains, whereas men are expected to make bigger decisions.

## Land Management and Economic Decision-Making

The research uncovered significant variations in land management authority between nuclear and extended family structures. Women in nuclear families often develop innovative coping strategies for managing agricultural assets, though these frequently rely on male intermediaries. Meena's experience illustrates this adaptation: *"Being a woman makes it difficult to manage the agricultural resources. So, I take help from my brother in this matter... In return, I help him with money."* The situation appears more complex in extended families, where wives often face exclusion from significant property decisions despite their active involvement in agricultural labor. Shaila's account is particularly revealing: *"I have to do every agricultural work in harvesting periods... yet I can barely participate in managing the land my husband owns."* This suggests that involvement in physical labor does not necessarily translate into decision-making authority. Some wives in nuclear families demonstrate remarkable agency in land management, as evidenced by Munni's experience: *"I take all the decisions regarding the management of our lands while he is abroad, but I discuss with him first to purchase new lands."* This indicates that while some wives achieve significant autonomy in property management, they often maintain consultative relationships with their migrant husbands, suggesting a form of negotiated independence rather than complete autonomy.

## The Dynamics of Household Management among Transnational Families

The research reveals distinct patterns in household management among left-behind wives of migrant workers, particularly concerning daily activities and decision-making autonomy. The findings indicate a significant divergence in experiences between wives residing in nuclear families versus those in extended family structures. In nuclear family settings, the absence of migrant husbands has paradoxically led to increased autonomy in daily household operations, particularly regarding food preparation and grocery management. As illustrated by Fatema's experience, *"After he left for the UAE, there is only me and my two children in the house. He sends money every month for monthly expenditures. I mostly make all the decisions for everyday food preparation... But when my husband comes to Bangladesh, he goes to the bazaar and buys everything."* This narrative exemplifies the temporary transformation of gender roles in transnational households, where wives assume primary decision-making responsibilities during their husbands' absence. However, this autonomy reverts to traditional patterns during spousal visits, as evidenced by Fatema's description of increasing her domestic duties and deferring to her husband's preferences. In contrast, wives in extended family structures experience significantly limited decision-making authority, even in routine matters such as meal planning. The persistence of traditional family hierarchies is particularly evident in Bilki's account: *"Every day I ask my mother-in-law about what will be cooked for that day. I cannot decide as there are many people in the house... My husband also sends money to my younger brother-in-law, and he mostly does the monthly bazaar."*

A notable finding concerns the financial management challenges faced by wives in nuclear families. While they exercise greater autonomy in daily decisions, they experience constant pressure regarding budget management. This is particularly evident in Meena's reflection: *"When my husband comes to Bangladesh, I become quite relieved as I do not have to worry that much about the budgets now... But when he is away, I have to think twice before buying any luxury item for my children."* This

statement underscores the complex interplay between increased autonomy and financial stress that characterizes the experience of wives in nuclear family arrangements.

### **The Politics of Remittance Management in Transnational Households**

The study reveals complex intersections between financial autonomy, social power dynamics, and gender relations in managing remittances among left-behind wives in Bangladesh. At the same time, distinct patterns can be seen in remittance management based on family structure. In extended families, traditional power hierarchies significantly influence financial decision-making. As Shaila notes, *"I have to get permission from the in-laws before spending time on things of my choice."* This observation reveals how extended family structures often maintain traditional power dynamics despite the physical absence of migrant husbands. Although many couples have a mutual understanding about the expenditure and utilization of the remittance, often women have to face criticism from their in-laws because they cannot consider that their sons are relying on their wives in terms of sending remittance, as they want to regulate the remittance. Setu explained that she discusses every expenditure with her husband; however, her in-laws falsely claim she transfers money to her parents. They are unhappy because her parents did not provide a dowry, making her life miserable. However, this study also discovered that some of the wives living in the extended family do not have to face that much negative reaction from their in-laws about receiving remittances. Their in-laws cooperate with them and do not oppose the decision of their wives. Mariyam is one of them, as she states, *"Previously, my father-in-law used to handle all the issues about remittance. But now he is quite old, so my husband sends money to my account. My in-laws do not have any problem with that."* In many cases, husbands send remittances separately for their parents and wives so that the wives do not face any difficulties while using remittances for their needs and their children. For instance, Sayeda Khatun shared that after separating from her in-laws, her husband sent money directly to her. The research also suggests that education plays a crucial role in remittance management capabilities. Fatema's case demonstrates how an educational background can facilitate better handling of banking and technological aspects of remittance processing. However, this can also lead to tensions with in-laws who may view education as a threat to traditional family dynamics. Although women have to face criticism since their husbands are living away from them, many women confidently handle this situation, ensuring transparency in their marital life. Munni's account reflects a defiant response to societal criticism: *"Coming from an urban background, I confidently handle negative reactions from my in-laws and neighbors. My husband trusts me, knowing I do not spend beyond our financial capabilities."* This resilience demonstrates the importance of self-confidence and spousal support in overcoming societal pressures.

### **Mobility**

Since the husbands of the left-behind wives cannot stay with them, their mobility is being regulated through a complex interplay of societal expectations and structural limitations, often shaped by patriarchal norms. This study found that most of the left-behind wives have to get rigorous permission from their husbands and in-laws while visiting their parents or other places. The findings indicate that mobility rights often intersect with economic activities, creating multilayered challenges for these women. Some participants demonstrated remarkable entrepreneurial initiative, though their experiences reveal both opportunities and constraints. Munni's case exemplifies how spousal support can enable economic mobility: *"I let him know that I needed money to open a poultry farm on our land... He was concerned that it would increase my work burden, but as it was something I wanted to do, he didn't oppose much."* Her narrative reveals how initial community skepticism transformed into acceptance through business success, challenging prevailing gender norms: *"When I had profited from the business, their perception started to change; one of my husband's relative also work on my farm now."*

However, other participants faced more restrictive conditions. Salma's experience illustrates how women negotiate within patriarchal constraints to achieve limited economic mobility: *"I wanted to teach*

*in kindergarten schools... But my husband and in-laws do not allow it since I'll need to go outside the home... I proposed to teach students at home as a private batch, and they approved it."* This adaptation strategy demonstrates how women craft spaces for economic activity within prescribed social boundaries.

The research uncovered significant variations in social mobility patterns. While some women enjoyed relative freedom in visiting family and attending social functions, others faced strict restrictions. Fatema's account reveals how absence paradoxically intensifies social constraints: *"He does not allow me to join the 'Mehedi nights' of my relative's marriage ceremony as he thinks that in his absence, I should not join the functions for entertainment because other people will think badly about me."* These restrictions often extend to dress codes and social interactions, as evidenced by Salma's experience: *"After my marriage, my in-laws and husband made the 'Burqa' my mandatory dress to wear while I am outside home."* Such practices reflect how physical mobility intersects with broader questions of social control and gender presentation. A notable finding was the emergence of digital surveillance as a new form of control over left-behind wives. Bilkis's account reveals how technology enables remote monitoring: *"I communicate with him through IMO video call, and he has the password of my IMO ID so that he can check my transparency."* Her internalization of this surveillance ("I am totally okay with it") demonstrates how patriarchal control mechanisms adapt to transnational contexts. Male migration creates paradoxical effects on women's mobility and autonomy. While physical absence sometimes creates opportunities for enhanced mobility and economic participation, it also intensifies social control through family surveillance and community scrutiny. The experiences of left-behind wives demonstrate both the resilience of patriarchal control mechanisms and women's agency in negotiating spaces for autonomy within these constraints. The study suggests that women's mobility remains deeply embedded in broader social structures and power relations. While some women successfully negotiate greater freedom within these constraints, others face intensified restrictions in their husbands' absence. These patterns indicate the need for more comprehensive support systems for left-behind wives, particularly in economic participation.

## Discussion

This study has explored new understandings of left-behind wives' life experiences apart from the existing literature. The existing literature suggests that access to economic resources empowers women enough to make significant life choices. However, this study shows that having access to remittance alone cannot ensure wives' decision-making ability in the family and personal life; rather, having control of the economic resources can enable them to make significant decisions in life. Besides, the literature highly emphasizes wives' educational qualifications to obtain freedom in the family after their husbands' migration. This study shows that education can ensure wives' access to the utilization of resources at a certain stage, but not to the full extent. Other significant patriarchal social dimensions determine wives' inferior position in the family as well as society. Despite having an education, wives are deprived of resource utilization and their fair rights because of dowry. On the other hand, the racist mindset of society also causes wives to be in inferior positions just because of having darker skin tones. Most importantly, to obtain the freedom of making life choices, this study finds that the geographic location of wives' origin plays a significant role rather than their academic qualifications. Thus, in most cases, left-behind wives in Bangladesh remain only partially empowered, as their ability to make autonomous life choices is constrained by existing socio-economic inequalities and patriarchal norms, which are further compounded by systemic issues such as dowry practices, educational aspects, and geographic disparities.

Migration abroad is a popular concept since it tends to improve the family's financial condition, which leads to the overall betterment of the family. However, it involves severe social problems that often get ignored, and wives are the ones who have to deal with the situations mostly. As the husband is the household head in patriarchal families, children strictly learn to obey the father. Following the absence of the father, they become free of abiding by the rules and act autonomously, neglecting the mother's

sayings. The helpless expressions of wives about their children validate the severity of the problem. According to the patriarchal mindset, mothers are supposed to take care of children and be soft-minded. However, when the husband lives abroad, the boy children often break the rules and become autonomous decision-makers, although they are underage, which results in bringing a bad reputation to the family through doing illegal activities in the locality as well as getting poor grades at school. Wives often feel vulnerable at this stage, as they cannot control their children despite being the main guardians in the absence of the father. These situations lead to dropping out of school at an early age and neglecting to pursue academic accomplishments at the college and university levels. As a result, parents prefer their sons to go abroad like their father as laborers so that they can earn a good sum of money staying under their father's watch. This inability of mothers to assert authority or become autonomous decision-makers in their households, coupled with their children's disregard for their guidance, further intensifies their disempowerment within the patriarchal structure of the family. On the other hand, although the families improved economically, the future of the next generation becomes challenging in this modern world, as the parents prefer earning money at an early age, ignoring the potential of their children in the academic field. In her theory of empowerment, one of the crucial indicators Kabeer stated in the Bangladesh context is women's status and contribution to strengthening children's education. This study finds that left-behind wives' experiences in determining their children's future in education and daily activities are negatively related.

Family resource management is another crucial indicator to understand women's status in the absence of a husband, as per empowerment theory. This study has focused on two significant resources for exploring women's status.

- Natural resource
- Economic resource

The land is a significant natural resource for the family, and wives are often deprived of it in terms of having access to and control of it. In most cases of extended families, while in-laws manage the land, wives are kept away from having control of the resource despite their active participation in cultivation on the land. Besides, wives who have access and control over the family property tend to discuss with their husbands before taking crucial steps like selling or buying land. They think it is fair to discuss and make mutual decisions on crucial issues. However, the majority of wives are away from land management as this is more of an outdoor activity, and have to deal with men outside of the home, which is highly discouraged by patriarchal norms and practices. However, wives from nuclear families have a higher tendency to act as autonomous decision-makers at certain stages in terms of land management. Decisions like when to sell the crops collected from the land and management of labourers during the cultivation period are maintained by the wives in association with male members of their in-laws. The ability to make small and large consumer purchases is determined by Kabeer as an indicator of understanding wives' status in families. In terms of everyday activities where women are required to get involved in public spaces, like purchasing groceries, they tend to take help from male children of neighbors to avoid the male gaze of public spaces. This often happens to the wives of nuclear families as they live alone. These dynamic highlights the intricate ways in which patriarchal norms shape women's access to and control over land and decision-making; however, the growing autonomy of wives in nuclear families and their involvement in specific stages of land management signal pathways toward the empowerment of women within these structures.

According to empowerment theory, agency practice is the second step to examine women's ability to make decisions of their own. Despite having access to resources, wives' ability to control the resources is often challenged by their husbands and in-laws. This study examines wives' agency through their status in the utilization of economic resources. Remittance is the best outcome labour migration aims for since its utilization brings the family members to a better social position. The findings of this study suggest a mixed dimension of wives' experience regarding the utilization of remittances and the reaction

of in-laws towards it. Wives of extended families tend to have limited access and control over remittance, while wives of nuclear families experience the opposite. Though women have more freedom to budget and spend money on nuclear families, they often get the blame for transferring money to their parents' houses. However, the reality is that wives usually get help from their parents in times of financial difficulties or other situations rather than from their in-laws. For example, a wife's parents provide a large amount of money to send her husband abroad. Dowry is another aspect through which wives' access and control of remittances are limited by in-laws. The findings of this study explore that dowry is practiced through different forms in labor migrant families. Wives' parents give domestic animals as dowry; besides, they contribute a big amount of money to send their daughter's husband abroad. Wives who failed to bring a dowry to the in-laws' family are deprived of having access to and control of the remittance. It happens mostly in extended families where wives live with in-laws and remittance is controlled by them. Findings further suggest that wives who had love marriages were also deprived of the utilisation of remittances by in-laws because wives' families did not provide a dowry. Thus, the findings underscore the significant challenges women face in exercising agency over economic resources, yet they also highlight that greater financial autonomy in nuclear families and the support received from natal families can serve as crucial stepping stones toward the empowerment and agency creation of women within patriarchal structures.

The final stage of determining empowerment as per Kabeer's theory is 'achievements. This study focused on the mobility of wives to understand their achievements. The significant achievements the wives have been able to make in their personal lives after their husbands' migration determine the status of the wives in terms of empowerment. The study finds the following aspects that act as crucial determiners to attain individual gains.

- **Education:** Educated wives tend to have more freedom in the utilization of resources and act as autonomous decision-makers compared to those without academic accomplishments. Being educated, they get full access to remittances as they deal with banks and have significant control over their utilization in the family. Besides, the educated wives bring extra income to the family as they tend to teach the kids of the locality at home. It is a good source of income for the wives to be able to spend money as per their choice and save. However, despite having qualifications, wives are discouraged from being professional teachers at local schools, as it requires going out of the home. The patriarchal norms of keeping women in private hinder the wives' professional potential and control their career choices.
- **Geographic location:** The geographic location where the women grew up leaves a big impact on determining their status in the in-laws' family and society. This study shows that growing up in city areas makes women more aware of their capabilities and mature enough to deal with patriarchal norms to gain personal achievements, even though they have to live in the village after their marriage. Having the advantage of being someone from city areas, wives can deal with in-laws' family members and husbands more maturely, without compromising their mobility. This study shows that instead of just doing household work, wives have been able to establish their own business of a poultry farm and successfully lead it to profitable business, making it an employment opportunity for locals and members of in-laws' families as well. Besides, going to public places and visiting family members does not appear as a big issue, as wives have a good mutual understanding with their husbands and in-laws and trust in each other.

This study finds that wives' mobility is controlled in several ways. The wives' privacy is controlled by their husbands despite being abroad. Husbands have access to their wives' online communication platforms, which violates their privacy. However, wives do not oppose that, believing that it should be a big deal since they have trust in each other. At the same time, none of the wives revealed that they also have access to their husbands' online platforms. Although their husbands are also living away from their wives, they do not allow reciprocal access to their online platforms, reinforcing the unequal dynamics of trust and control in the relationship. These findings highlight the need for addressing

the unequal power dynamics in mobility and privacy to promote the empowerment and autonomy of women in such familial structures.

However, in some cases, the husband's migration is positively associated with the economic emancipation of the wives. For instance, wives can generate extra income in the family through sewing clothes and handmade caps (tupi), with that income, they can buy things of their choice and gifts for their parents as well from their own money without taking permission from husbands and in-laws. The wives would not be able to continue the income-generating activities if their husbands were at home, as husbands do not encourage wives' engagement in activities that require communication with other men. Another important aspect the findings have explored is that despite providing the same quality service as men provide in local tailor shops, wives receive a lower price than men. Wage discrimination is a common issue in this aspect, as wives do not have a shop in the locality, leading to customers giving them lower wages. This illustrates that while migration can create avenues for wives' economic emancipation and agency through income-generating activities, persistent wage discrimination underscores the need for broader structural changes to fully realize women's empowerment and equitable agency creation.

## **Conclusion**

Left-behind wives' empowerment in Bangladesh remains partial and constrained, shaped by intersecting factors including family structure, geographic origin, dowry practices, and deeply embedded patriarchal norms. While some wives have achieved limited economic independence through small-scale entrepreneurial activities, systematic barriers continue to restrict their full empowerment. These findings suggest the need for more comprehensive approaches to women's empowerment that address both structural inequalities and cultural norms, rather than focusing solely on economic resources or education. By adopting Naila Kabeer's framework of empowerment, the study illustrates that achieving agency and autonomy requires structural changes in societal norms and practices. Empowering women in these familial contexts necessitates interventions to dismantle patriarchal barriers, address systemic inequalities, and promote equitable access to resources and opportunities. Thus, this study advocates for targeted policy interventions and community-level efforts to transform the socio-economic landscape for left-behind wives in patriarchal settings.

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