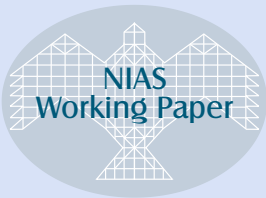


WP7-2017



Anamika Ajay

NIAS

STEPPING INTO ANOTHER WOMAN'S SHOES

Substitute Women in Families of Female Emigrant Workers



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

Bengaluru, India

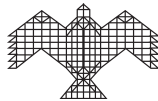
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Anamika Ajay¹

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NIAS-UNDP Policy Research Initiative on Inequality and Human Development

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Introduction

It is widely accepted in development policy thinking that gender inequalities can be challenged by providing women access to education, income, credit and political power. Most development programs are based on the belief that enabling women's access to these resources would initiate 'virtuous spirals' leading to well-being of the women, their families and then the communities they belong to (Mayoux, 1999). However, feminist scholars are becoming increasingly critical of this approach (Kabeer, 2005; Parpart, 2014). Micro-studies have now established that the extent to which access to education, income, credit or political positions impact women's empowerment is dependent on the social context within which they exist (Kabeer, 2005). For instance, working women in countries like Japan, Britain and India face the dual burden of fulfilling responsibilities in their workspace as well as within their households (Stockman et al., 1992; Hervey et al., 1998). Thus an individual woman's access to income does not

always translate to changes in gender relations within the household. To this extent, female emigration for work is often thought to provide women with an opportunity to escape domestic patriarchy to a large extent as she physically moves away from the family and localised patriarchal control. Through migration the woman moves out of the role of domestic caregiver in the household and takes on the position as its primary breadwinner. This change in role of the woman who migrates out could have many consequences for the household. In the absence of the primary caregiver, the family has to be reconfigured in a way that the position of the domestic caregiver is filled. The question then is, does female emigration fundamentally alter the gender relations in the home she migrates from? This paper argues that this does not necessarily happen. The absence of the female caregiver in the family does not always imply that the men who are left behind take on this role. It is possible that the negotiations within the family could require other women within the family

to step into the shoes of the migrant woman worker, typically leaving patriarchal gender relations in the household largely unchanged.

The paper builds its case by developing the concepts of conditional autonomy, compliance and substitution, in order to understand the nature of autonomy women achieve through female emigration and its effects on the status of other women within their own households. It begins by enunciating the conceptual interconnections between individual autonomy and collective empowerment. This is followed by a section on understanding the nature of female emigration process in Thirumarady village which has benefitted from the second phase of development in Kerala. The third section looks at the impact of female emigration on gender relations in the left-behind families and analyses the specific ways in which families ensure that female emigration does not challenge the established gender norms and ideologies within the household. The final section comments on the ways in which patriarchal control is expressed within the households even when some individual women are able to challenge traditional gender norms and achieve autonomy.

Role of Individual Autonomy in Collective Empowerment of Women

Individual autonomy is a valuable concept to evaluate the extent to which women are able to shape their own destinies without external restrictions (Meyers 1989; Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000). Autonomy here is understood as the achievement of self-determination, which is, having the freedoms and opportunities to think and make choices about what one wants to be and do (Mackenzie, 2014). Autonomy then influences both individual functionings as well as individual capabilities in Sen's terms. According to Sen (2001: 15), every individual would have a set of functionings which consists of all that one wants to be or do. However, achieving all of these together may not be possible. At a given point in time, an individual will have alternative subsets of functionings that she can achieve, or what Sen terms as capabilities. Autonomy becomes an important indicator of the extent to which an individual is free to make choices of which capability sets she could pursue at a given point in time without external constraints. The social context within which the individuals exist could influence the extent to which one is free to make these choices. Some social contexts could enable individual autonomy while the others may inhibit

it. The extent to which one makes autonomous choices is thus relational in nature (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000).

Autonomy is influenced by the individual's internal abilities (emotional, intellectual, and physiological abilities) and the context (family, social, political, cultural and economic) in which she is situated. To be autonomous would require the individual to have certain internal abilities that allow her to critically evaluate her situation and decide on what she wants to be or do. This is specifically important in cases where through socialisation and rigid social norms, the subordinate position of women in society is widely accepted and internalised by women. As a result, there could be cases where women are unable to critically reflect upon their experiences and hence lack the ability to question practices that discriminate against them. To this extent, it has been argued that women should inculcate certain internal capabilities like a sense of self-worth (McLeod, 2002) and self-direction (Abrams, 1998) to be able to decide what one really wants to be or do.

This implies that autonomy can be influenced by an individual's associations. Some social associations could nurture internal abilities like self-worth and self-direction while others would inhibit

the individual from being autonomous (Brisson, 2000). An individual's associations are shaped by her caste, race, religion, gender, class and beliefs (Kabeer, 2011). By virtue of this, she becomes a part of multiple affiliations, some that are given to her by birth, some chosen by her and some that are forced on her. Every social relationship comes with its own set of norms, commitments and rules for its members.. These affiliations shape their social identities in the way Kwame Anthony Appiah (2010) defines it. He suggests that social identities are created when individual recognises herself to be a part of a group, when others recognises her to be a part of the group and there is a public discourse around that group. By affiliating with the family, kinship, caste, religion and other groups, the individual woman obtains multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991). These play a role in influencing the extent to which she has access to resources and the number of real options that are available to her. Through these complex processes of interactions between the social context and the individual, the individuals achieve different levels of autonomy. Thus, the level of autonomy that an individual attains is socially determined.

Development plays a central role in enabling an individual to think and

act autonomously. According to Sen (2001), development is an improvement of individual freedoms. Development is expected to improve autonomy by shaping individual capabilities and providing external conditions for an individual to make free choices and act upon them. Studies in the field of gender and development have looked at the role that access to instrumental freedoms like education (Jejeebhoy, 1995), employment (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Kabeer, 2001), property rights (Agarwal, 1997) and microfinance (Mayoux, 1999) have led to improving freedoms of individual women. Development policies are targeted towards improving women's access to these instrumental freedoms. However the potential of these instrumental freedoms to provide substantive freedoms and autonomy is dependent on the complex interactions between the individual and the social context (Kabeer, 2005).

Like other instrumental freedoms, female emigration too could result in empowering the individual woman as she achieves both mobility as well as economic independence through work-related emigration. Studies suggest that emigration for work has helped women increase their self-worth and their ability to exercise greater control

over their lives (Oishi, 2005). The sheer distance helps them to escape the control of the family and community level gender norms in matters of daily life resulting in some degree of autonomy (Percot, 2005). They are found to have developed better skills to bargain with patriarchy within and outside the family (Kweun Yu, 2007). But, there are also evidence of female emigrant workers, who migrate for less skilled work like domestic workers, facing exploitations and insecurities in the informal sectors in the destination countries (Kodoth and Varghese, 2012). Studies on the impact of female emigration have addressed the impact of the emigration process on the levels of empowerment or disempowerment of the individual woman at the destination. However, the nature of negotiations that the emigrant women have with her family and also the role of other women within her family in these negotiation processes are less explored. The questions therefore the paper intends to answer are: How do rural societies with entrenched gender ideologies cope with processes of female emigration? How do rural women negotiate with families on decisions related to female emigration? Does female emigration alter gender relations in the left behind families of the migrant woman worker?

Female Emigration from Thirumarady

Economic development in Kerala can be seen to have occurred in two phases. The first phase is widely accepted to have occurred prior to 1987, the year in which large scale inflow of remittances to Kerala was first recorded. This phase, often referred to as the 'Kerala Model' of development (Chakraborty, 2005), was characterised by an unusual approach in which the first and the subsequent governments prioritised social welfare especially education and health over economic prosperity for public investments (Tharakan, 1997; Oomen, 2010). This led to a creation of human capital that had achieved basic education and health. However, the prioritisation of social sector over industries resulted in unavailability of job-creating sectors leading to high levels of unemployment in Kerala during the 1960s and 70s (Prakash, 1998). This economic situation was turned around by the oil boom in Gulf. The rise in investments in construction and service sectors in the Gulf resulted in increased demand for unskilled and semi-skilled male workforce (Zachariah et al., 2003). The historical trade and cultural links between Malabar and the Persian Gulf also played a role in enabling people from Kerala mainly from Malabar region

to gain entry into the Gulf (Osella and Osella, 2013). Since the demand for labour in the gulf was in sectors that preferred men over women, out-migration from Kerala during the first phase was male-dominated.

By 1987, remittances from the Gulf contributed to a rapid rise in the state income. This marked the beginning of the second phase of Kerala's economic growth story (Kannan, 2005). Households began to make greater investments in health, education and real estate. This led to a reduction in government spending on social welfare (Aravindan and Menon, 2010) and thereby paving way for private investments in higher education and health sectors (Jafar, 2013). Women too benefitted from this process. Enrolment of women in arts and science subjects and also professional courses for 'feminine' jobs increased (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005). Thus, the society was open to women accessing public spaces through education and employment but this access was to be regulated by and confined to gender norms that associate women with care labour (ibid). As in the first phase, the global labour demand provided opportunities to this specific group of educated unemployed workforce. Interestingly, this time around the demand was from the health

sectors in Gulf and OECD countries (Kodoth and Jacob, 2013). Medical education in Kerala has been historically considered to meet western standards due to the role of missionaries who set up hospitals and training institutes that trained young women especially from Christian communities to be absorbed by missionary-run hospitals in Catholic countries (Percot, 2006). This tradition popularised nursing jobs among women in Kerala especially among Christian communities. Thus the second phase of Kerala saw a significant out-migration of women for work. Kerala nurses therefore represent a 'gender turn' in Kerala's migration story.

Thirumarady is an example to understand the impact of Kerala's development in the second phase. It is a Christian dominated village (52.3% of the village are Christians) with rest of the population practising Hinduism. By late 19th century Central Kerala was known to have attracted the attention of the European missionaries who wanted to civilise the native Christians called the Syrian

Christians² and to convert the Hindus to Christianity. They imparted Christian values and modern education through the Churches and missionaries. While the Syrian Christian communities largely remained resistant to conversion efforts by the Roman Catholic Church, they took to modern education very quickly. The village became a centre for modern education almost a century back. For instance the Syrian Christian Church in the village established a learning centre in 1918 that attained the status of a higher secondary school in 1934. It was one of the very few schools in the region that imparted English language education attracting people from far-away places. The school was open to both girls and boys to receive modern education across communities during the period. Apart from imparting modern education, the Catholic missionaries were also engaged in proselytization of the Hindu communities who were oppressed by a rigid caste system especially the Dalit community called *Pulayas*. Due to rigid caste norms, *Pulayas* could have no control over land either through ownership or

² The Syrian Christian community in Kerala traces back its history to the conversion of upper caste Hindus like Namboodiris and Nairs into Christianity by St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ who was believed to have come to Kerala in 52 AD. These converted Christians are the oldest Christian communities in Kerala and are also referred to as native Christians or Nazranis. The Portuguese and the British missionaries wanted to convert these native Christians, who had their allegiance to the Eastern Rites, to shift their allegiance to the Roman Church and the Pope but remained largely unsuccessful. The group however underwent an internal split due to conflicts over issues of allegiance and control over resources resulting in two factions-the Jacobites and the Orthodox. Only a few families in Thirumarady had converted to the Orthodox Church with a majority of Syrian Christians following the Jacobite church.

tenancy in the early and mid-twentieth century. They continue to be marginalised in terms of land ownership even today. Nonetheless, socially *Pulayas* through collectivised resistance were able to challenge many oppressive caste practices. By early twentieth century in Travancore, through access to Church-run schools, the economic and social support provided by Christian missionaries and the social reform movement initiated by Dalit leaders like *Ayyankali* against caste Hindus, *Pulayas* gained a collective voice. Many *Pulayas* saw conversion to Christianity as a way to liberate themselves from the Hindu caste oppression. However, the 'Converted Christians' as they are referred to in the village began to face discrimination by other Christians revealing caste-like rules and hierarchies among Christians (Fuller, 1976).

Among the Hindus, the major social groups are the patrilineal castes like *Ezhavas* (categorised as other backward classes), *Viswakarmas* (also categorised as a backward community) and *Namboodiris* (Malayalam *Brahmins*, who despite being few in numbers were huge landlords until mid-twentieth century) and the matrilineal caste group called *Nairs*. Among these, the *Ezhavas* today have gone through remarkable transformations. From being an unapproachable lower caste

in the traditional *jati* system to today becoming one of the most economically successful communities through coconut cultivation, toddy business, real estate and execution of construction contracts and most recently their movement into large scale leased-in farming of pineapple. Based on the *jati* system, the *Nairs* are placed in between with the *Namboodiris* on the higher side and *Ezhavas* on the lower side.

By early 20th century the values propagated by modern education and Christian missionaries gained currency. They argued that for self and national development, it was important that each individual played his/her part by being self-disciplined, productive and enterprising. This they believed was only possible through an ideal family, that is, a modern nuclear family structure with a male breadwinner and a female domestic caregiver (Devika, 2007). Every community went through a phase of reformation internally to adapt to these modern ideals that gained popularity. This was done by ridiculing what was traditional or what diverged from the modern ideals. For instance, matrilineal family structures were seen to be backward and unproductive as it did not inculcate a sense of individual responsibility among men and the prevalence of practices

like *Sambandham* (the customary practise among the *Nairs* which outlined sexual relationships between men and women especially between *Nair* men and women or *Namboodiri* men and *Nair* women) were seen as indecent (ibid). Modern education was seen to be an important step towards making men and women more productive in their functions as the breadwinner and domestic managers respectively. Even today, commentators on the Kerala Model attribute its success to the role of men as political actors and women as agents in the domestic domain (Jeffrey, 2003). Men and women in Thirumarady too took to modern education very early as a part of this modernisation project. The literacy rate in Thirumarady during the 1961 census

was 61.1% which was higher than the state's literacy rate which was 55.1%.

Education continues to play a significant role in Thirumarady. The village has two pre-primary schools, four primary schools, three high schools, one vocational higher secondary school, one teachers training school, two parallel colleges, one Government Arts and Science college, a private Engineering college. Through the primary survey conducted in 2016³ it was found that 16.26% of persons above the age of 15 years had completed their college education and 17.5% had successfully completed their 12th grade or pre-degree course. Data also suggests that women's participation in different levels of education is high. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of Men and Women* within each level of Education in Thirumarady

		Males	Females	Total
Within each Level of education completed	Illiterates	31.50	68.50	100
	Literates with no formal education	34.10	65.90	100
	Primary education	36.30	63.70	100
	Secondary Education	53.41	45.10	100
	Higher secondary education	42.00	58.00	100
	College education	47.78	52.22	100

*Note: Men and Women above 15 years. Also, 54.6% of the individuals above the age of 15 who were surveyed were women

Source: Author's calculation of Survey data, 2016

³ Quantitative data for the study was collected using survey method. A sample of 300 households was selected using stratified random sampling method. In line with the objective of the study to understand how women from different socio-economic contexts negotiate spaces like education, work and migration; the criterion for stratification was the religion that was mainly followed in the household.

Between the communities, there are variations in the levels of education that women accessed (See Table 2). For instance, the largest proportion of women belonging to the *Pulaya* community have not proceeded beyond secondary education (45.21%) and there is a significant population of Dalit women who are not literate (13.7%). Nonetheless, it should be noted that education and reservation in government jobs provided opportunities to few Dalit families for upward mobility in the village. *Ezhava* women have a significant presence in all levels of education. While they are mostly educated till the level of secondary education, significant proportion of *Ezhava* women have also continued on with further education (15.96% completed higher secondary education and 17.02% completed college education). This is a remarkable transformation for a group which was considered at the lowest rung of economic and social order. Through state initiatives like land reforms, education and collective mobilisation, *Ezhavas* today are one of the most resourceful communities in Thirumarady. They can be considered the dominant caste in Thirumarady, in Srinivas's sense, due to their numerical, political and economic dominance they

have achieved today (Srinivas, 1959). Majority of women belonging to *Nair*, Syrian Christian and Roman Catholic communities have studied until the secondary school. Women belonging to the Orthodox community have mostly completed higher secondary education. *Namboodiri* women are mostly college educated (54.55%).

Unlike the primary and secondary education systems, access to higher education is significantly influenced by the group's access to resources. For instance, among women who have completed college education in Thirumarady, the largest proportion of women belong to the Syrian Christian community (29.3%), followed by Roman Catholic women (22.4%), *Ezhavas* (19%), *Nairs* and *Namboodiris* (6.9% each). Except for *Ezhavas*, all the other four communities have always enjoyed a privileged status in Kerala in terms of their access to economic and social resources.

Despite these variations, the fact that a significant proportion of women above 15 years from all communities had completed secondary education is indicative of a positive change. Women's access to education in Kerala has been observed to have led to their

Table 2: Educational achievements of women* belonging to different communities (in %)

Religion	Communities/ caste	Illiterate	Literate with no formal schooling	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Higher Secondary Education	College education	Total
Hindu	Pulayas (Dalits)	13.7	4.11	19.18	45.21	15.07	2.74	100
	Ezhava (Lower caste)	9.57	7.45	13.83	36.17	15.96	17.02	100
	Vishwakarma (Lower Caste)	2.38	4.76	11.9	47.62	19.05	14.29	100
	Nairs (Matrilineal upper caste)	5.13	7.69	5.13	48.72	17.95	15.38	100
	Namboodiris (Brahmans)	0	0	9.09	27.27	9.09	54.55	100
Christians	Converted Christians (Dalit converts)	7.69	11.54	3.85	50	19.23	7.69	100
	Roman Catholics	4.26	6.38	15.96	30.85	23.4	19.15	100
	Syrian Christians (Jacobites)	8.55	9.21	16.45	38.16	14.47	13.16	100
	Syrian Christians (Orthodox)	0	8.33	16.67	25	33.33	16.67	100

Source: Author's calculation from Survey Data, 2016

*Note: Above 15 years

individuation (Devika and Thampi, 2012). In Thirumarady too, the access to higher levels of education has enabled women to articulate their aspirations as

individuals regarding their work, what they want to do with their time and their desire to be more independent. A 21 year old *Ezhava* girl who had just completed

her college education in English literature remarked:

“I want to study more. I want to do a PhD like you (referring to the interviewer) and become a college Professor. I don’t want to be like my mother. I can’t imagine a life in which I have to spend all my time in the kitchen like her. It is so sad that she does not even get time to read books which used to be her favourite pass time when she was younger.” (Interview dated 25 January, 2016)

Greater individuation especially among younger women has resulted in their aspirations for being more economically independent. For instance, 98 % of the surveyed women suggested that women should engage in paid work as it would make them more self-sufficient. But, social norms and family pressures play a crucial role in determining the extent to which this process of individuation can impact actions of women. The prevalence of domestic ideologies in the village can be made evident by looking at the data on participation of women in the workforce. Unemployment among women who have achieved higher levels of education implies that, individuation or the desire to be independent is often not realised through actions (See table 3).

Table 3: Women’s education and work participation in Thirumarady (in percentage)

	Workers	Non - Workers	Total
Illiterate	4.65	95.35	100
Literate with no formal education	2.56	97.44	100
Primary education (1st-4th)	14.81	85.19	100
Secondary education (5th-10th)	30.22	69.78	100
Higher secondary education	26.53	73.47	100
College education	42.17	57.83	100
Total	25.31	74.69	100

Source: Author’s Survey Data, 2016

The low level of work participation of women in Thirumarady, as in the case of Kerala and India, is to some extent structurally influenced. The sectors that dominate the local economy in the village are traditionally considered masculine sectors. Despite the rapid movement towards non-farm activities in Thirumarady, the survey data shows that agriculture continues to employ significant proportion of workers in the village (32.83%). However, the changes in nature of cultivation and cropping patterns that occurred in the village over the years have had negative

impacts on female participation in paid agricultural work. Thirumarady was an agrarian village cultivating majorly paddy, horticulture and coconut cultivation until 1990s. During the 1990s, the global prices for rubber increased substantially and rubber cultivation require less labour than paddy cultivation which meant that in smaller landholdings family labour could be used optimally for production activities. The census 1991 had recorded that 62.2% of the workers in the village were involved in agricultural activities and this dropped to 40.1% in Census 2001 and further down to 35.5% in Census 2011. The important thing to note here is that the Census does not include plantation cultivators and workers within the categories of 'cultivators' and 'agricultural workers'. The significant drop in food crop cultivation in 1991 saw a simultaneous shift to cultivation of cash crops like rubber and coconut. However, the shift also resulted in the displacement of women paid workers who earlier worked in paddy cultivation. The female agriculture workforce dropped from 66.24% in 1991 to 39.63% in 2001. They were displaced from one sector without any significant alternatives. Women were not trained or preferred for rubber tapping or coconut tree climbing. They were considered to be 'inappropriate' for women. Movement towards cash crops

improved household income as well as their spending patterns. Household expenditures on education, construction and real estate activities increased during 1990s (Kurian, 2004). The greater access to education made agricultural activities less preferable to young men and women which resulted in labour shortage leading to large scale in-migration of workers from Orissa and Bengal for work in paddy, pineapple and banana cultivation in Thirumarady.

The other major sectors in Thirumarady that employ most workers are the construction (14.9%) and business/petty traders/ shop owners (9.07%) and the transport sectors (6.91%). All these sectors are traditionally considered to be male jobs. 95.1% of these sectors have male workers as opposed to a meagre 4.9% of female workers. Women mostly work in sectors that are often seen as feminine jobs like care work, teaching, nursing, domestic work, stitching, beauty services suggesting gendered nature of occupational choices. Thus women's access to employment in Thirumarady is closely tied with the gender norms that associate women's responsibilities to nurturing and caregiving.

The rise in income and the upward mobility of families have resulted in

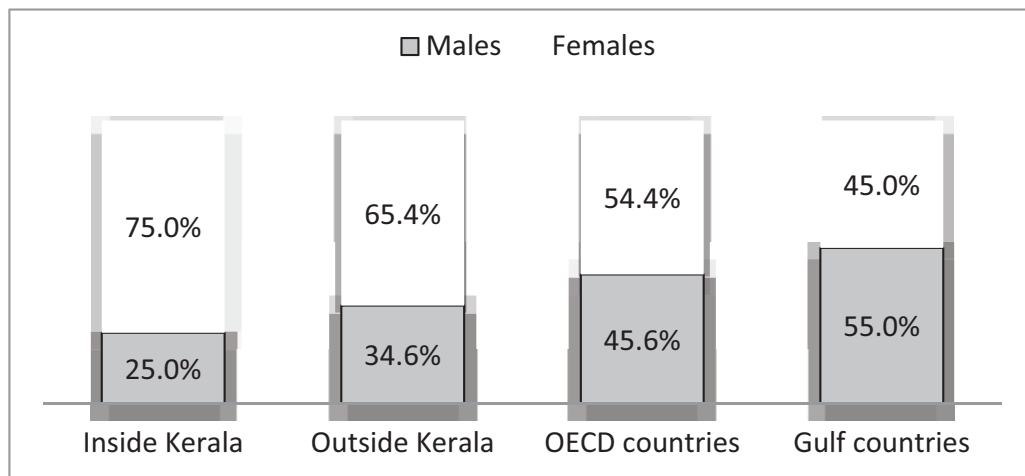
women retreating from the workforce. For instance, larger the size of the landholding owned by the households in Thirumarady, lesser is the probability of women in those households to engage in paid work. The preferences for the nature of work became guided by many social norms. A woman's primary role is thought to be that of the domestic manager and the choice to work outside the household is to be negotiated with the family interests and ideologies. For instance, male household heads were of the opinion that the priority of all women should be to provide care to other family members and complete household chores. They suggested that women's decision to work should be conditional on three factors. Firstly she can go out and work only if she ensures completion of domestic responsibilities, secondly she is required to work if there are financial constraints on the family which the male breadwinner is unable to overcome on his own and thirdly, when the woman is educated and finds a 'respectable' job appropriate for women, like teaching.

While the local economic and social processes pose many challenges for women to have meaningful participation in paid work, the global demand for female labour especially as care workers and nurses increased during the 1990s.

Female workers were preferred to men in nursing and care work. This global demand for the female labour had an impact on the choice of courses that women opted for in their higher education. This coupled with the fact that frequent fluctuations in rubber prices led to financial crises in many families, made it a viable economic strategy for women to migrate out for work. Women also saw this as an opportunity to lead more autonomous lives and also to make economic contributions to the family. Christian women became pioneers in the sense that they were more open to nursing jobs when compared to Hindus. Due to the demand for nursing education among girls in Thirumarady, a nursing education institution was started within the Government Arts and Science College.

Migration, today, is a significant part of the social and economic processes in Thirumarady. Around 56.67% of the households surveyed in the village had at least one of its members living outside the village. 44% of the surveyed households have had at least one member migrate outside Kerala to other parts of India and other countries in the last 10 years and 38.3% households in the village are currently dependent on remittances. Thus, more than one-third of the village

Figure 1: Gender-wise data on Migration from Thirumarady to various destinations



Source: Author's calculation of survey data, 2016

depends on remittances as a source of income. Migration from Thirumarady is female-dominated. 63.5% of the individuals who migrated out of the village to other parts of Kerala, India and to other countries are women (See Figure 1). In Thirumarady, 69.6% of the women who had migrated out of the village had mainly done so for work. In 2016, the female to male ratio of emigrant workers was 109 female workers for 100 male workers. This implies that there are regional diversities in the patterns of migration and by focusing on the state averages to argue that emigration for work from Kerala is dominated by men, we are ignoring those pockets within the state where women migrate more than men.

Female migrant workers from Thirumarady are mostly skilled and educated workforce. 75% of the female emigrant workers are involved in the nursing profession and institutional work, 10% software and IT professionals, 6.25% teachers, 3.75% domestic care workers and rest are students. Education in these professions is also expensive, as much of higher education in Kerala now is privatised. As a result, women belonging to poor families have very little access to skilled opportunities outside Kerala. There are clear differences in the nature of work opted by women from poorer families as opposed to women from more resourceful families. All the women who migrated for unskilled care work belong to poorer families. Evidence

also suggests that the experiences of the domestic workers in the informal sectors in the destination countries can be disempowering (Rodriguez, 2005; Kodoth & Varghese, 2012).

Majority of the female emigrant workers (77.21%) belong to Christian communities. It is argued here that the Church plays a very important social role in the process of female emigration as nurses and nuns. A few families in Thirumarady spoke about how the Church in the 1940s played a role in providing opportunities for some of their female family members as nuns, nurses and domestic workers in other parts of the world especially in the Catholic countries. In 2016, there were no evidences for the church actively organising for recruitment of Christian women into nursing jobs in other countries. However what was interesting is that the families used the church to network and increase their social capital. Young girls would meet up with the return migrants to collect information required for migration. Families became more willing to send their daughters to a destination if they knew that there were families within the church parish who had family members there.

Upper caste Hindus like *Nairs* and *Namboodiris* continue to have entrenched

ideologies regarding women and work and hence restrict women from migrating out alone for work. Among the Hindus, poorer *Ezhavas* are more open to female migration for work, the *Ezhava* families with greater resources too are now subscribing to domestic ideologies for women like the *Nairs* and *Namboodiris*. Poorer *Pulaya* families are open to female migration for work, however due to lack of economic and social capital they are unable to meet the costs to pay agencies and find a skilled job outside Kerala. Thus, the few *Pulaya* women who have access to skilled education, made possible by government reservations for Dalit students in higher education, were unable to find skilled work through migration.

Complying with Family Patriarchy to Achieve Conditional Autonomy

Autonomy is achieved when the individual is free to decide on what she wants and has the freedom to act upon these choices. Female emigration to that extent allows women to have greater control over their lives due to the sheer distance they travel away from the patriarchal control of the family. However, in reality, the extent to which the emigrant woman achieves autonomy is conditional upon the nature of negotiations she has with her family. Marriage and family structure play a critical

role in determining whether and to what extent women could take autonomous decisions regarding emigration. Conditional autonomy is the freedom that the woman achieves to act autonomously provided she meets the conditions posed by the gender norms within the family. In the bargain for autonomy, the individual woman is required to ensure that the gender norms within the family are not challenged through her absence. This is done by agreeing to do two things. The first is to agree to abide by the rules of conduct and gender norms defined by the family and community she belongs to. The second is by ensuring that she transfers the role of the primary caregiver to another woman within the family. She enjoys the autonomy as long as she is able to meet these conditions.

Most of the women who had skilled education were unmarried when they first migrated from Thirumarady. Due to privatisation of higher education in Kerala, education has become very expensive. As a result families find it more viable to send their daughters to nearby states like Karnataka for nursing education. This exposure to higher education in locations outside their village not only allowed them to have career aspirations but also to experience a life away from the localised

control of family patriarchy. Young girls often collect information required for migration on their own. The initial visits to the agencies are mostly done with friends and not with family members. It is only when substantial information is collected that the families are involved. A 23-year-old Syrian Christian woman who aspires to migrate remarked:

“I always wanted to be in the medical profession. When I talk to my seniors from college who have gone to UK and Germany, I get very excited. Hospitals there are more professional and nurses get more respect. Here we are made to do all kinds of odd jobs. It will be so good if I manage to get a job there, I can travel and see new places. I can be more free and independent there. I am now attending German classes in Kottayam. I hope I get a job there” (Interview dated 4 January, 2016)

The scope especially for nurses to find jobs overseas led many families to be open to the idea of sending their daughters away even before marriage. Female emigration was seen as a viable livelihood strategy for families especially when the rubber prices and the lull in construction activities affected many households. Daughters are also seen as potential breadwinners for the family.

This status came with some privileges as well as responsibilities.

An Ezhava woman remarked,

“Raising three girls is not easy. We not only have to educate them but also save money for their dowry. My husband is the only earning member now. That is why we advised our eldest daughter to take up nursing education. My husband sold some land for her nursing education in Davangere. She will complete her course in another 2 months. We are praying she finds a job in the Gulf. She is already 23 years and has to get married. She has two younger sisters also. Everything is going to need a lot of money. We tell her that we are ageing and she should start taking up responsibilities soon. We have done all we can until now.” (Interview dated 27 February, 2016)

The families expect their young daughters to contribute and take on financial responsibilities of the household. Families believe that women can contribute to their natal families only until marriage and so a major portion of her earnings goes to the natal family until her marriage. Remittances are mostly invested by families in construction of houses, purchase of consumer and luxury goods, purchase of land, education of children or siblings. Remittances are also sent

for religious purposes like renovating temples/churches, contributions towards rituals and festivals. For some migrants, these responsibilities could put financial constraints on them to such an extent that in some cases they are even forced to continue in workplaces or jobs that are abusive or exploitative. However for many young girls the mobility brings them greater freedoms in terms of their decisions related to dressing, spending money on personal needs and also their socialisation. Young women visit the malls, go out with friends on weekends and also have greater freedoms to interact with men. A young migrant nurse who works in Israel had come back to Thirumarady to attend her local Church festival suggested that she enjoyed much more freedoms in Israel than in her village.

“Nobody cares what I wear or who I meet there. Over here, people are more bothered about what happens in their neighbours’ life than their own lives. There is more freedom there especially for women.” (Interview dated 4 March, 2016)

However, families in Thirumarady often mentioned how they continued to regulate and monitor actions of their young daughters. It seemed important for them to establish that the control of the family over the morals and actions

of young women do not diminish with her mobility. Technology played an important role in such regulations. A Syrian Christian woman suggested:

“I talk to my daughter everyday through Skype. I don’t want her to feel lonely there so we talk about what she did during the day and I update her about our lives here. It is important to talk often because otherwise the family ties are broken. It is in such families that girls become more influenced by their friends and take wrong paths (*thettaya vazhi*) forgetting our culture. I always advise her to be very careful while she interacts with men especially. I always remind her that as women we should be more careful and not send wrong signals to men. Young women are more vulnerable. I tell her after marriage she can do whatever she wants and enjoy her life with her husband (*Kalyanam kazhinyittu nee ninde bharthavinde kooode adichupolichol*). Until then she needs to be careful”. (Interview dated 4 February, 2016)

Regulating the unmarried young migrant woman is not only seen to be important to maintain the social status of the family but also to ensure that the young woman does not engage in actions that would reduce her value in the marriage market. Decisions related to marriage become an important site for negotiating

between family control and individual freedoms. Apart from the contributions towards the household expenditure the woman is expected to make savings for her own dowry as well as that of her siblings. They save money to buy gold for the marriage. Families of unmarried migrant workers face greater pressure to spend extravagantly for the wedding. The Syrian Christian household head whose daughter is a migrant nurse in New York remarked:

“I spent the money my daughter sends me to renovate this house and now I am buying gold for her marriage. People will judge her income and job by looking at our house and how much we give as dowry. I don’t also want the groom’s family or anyone for that matter to think that I wasted all my daughter’s earnings in New York.” (Interview dated 29 January, 2016)

Thus, young women engage and comply to dowry practices and lavish consumption so that the family status is not tarnished. By saving for their own dowry which is no doubt a regressive practice, women use it as an opportunity to have a greater say in who they want/not want to marry. Women in such cases play a greater role in the decisions related to marriage than other young girls who are financially dependent on their families. They often

prefer men who are either already working outside Kerala or who are willing to emigrate with them after marriage. For men who prioritise migration as an economic strategy, marrying migrant women allows them an easier route to migrate. The migrant woman therefore is responsible for the 'family status production' as Papanek (1979) suggests and this requires her to participate and abide by traditional gender norms.

The Substitute Women and Patriarchy in Left-behind Families

The nature of negotiations that the married emigrant women have with their families is very different from the negotiations involving unmarried women. This is one of the reasons why unmarried migrant women prefer those men as grooms who are willing to migrate with them after marriage. Apart from unmarried migrant women, about 12.2 % of the women who migrated from Thirumarady were married and who had left their husbands and children behind in the village. The migrant woman becomes the main breadwinner of the family through migration which also implies that she gives up the role of the main caregiver in the family. The question then is how do such families cope with the absence of its main

caregiver? Who takes over the domestic responsibilities in her absence? Do men start participating in household chores in cases where the female migrants are the main breadwinners?

The domestic ideologies are rigidly imposed in case of married women and there are many kinds of familial pressures on married women to fit into the role of caregivers. Marriage poses greater constraints on women's freedoms to work. Domestic responsibilities become the most important responsibility expected of married women. In the case of non-migrant working women, these expectations often result in double burden of managing home and workplace responsibilities. In the case of migrant woman, this is not possible. The physical mobility of the woman to a far off location would imply that she would be unavailable to continue her role as the domestic manager. The norms around masculinities are also rigidly followed. Men do not retreat to domestic responsibilities once the woman migrates out. The respectability of the man is closely associated with his ability to be the main breadwinner of the family. Their participation in domestic work is seen as sign of their deteriorating status within the family. Thus, in families where the females migrate out for work

men do not participate in the household chores. The option is then to substitute the migrant woman with another woman who could take on the role of the caregiver of the family.

It was found that in all the cases where the married woman planned for emigration, one of the conditions put on her was to ensure that there is some other woman within the family who could take on the role of the caregiver in her absence. That is, a major condition put on the emigrating woman was to identify a “substitute woman” for the household who would step in to fulfil the domestic responsibilities of the household. It is in this context that the family structure becomes important. Married women could consider migrating out for work on their own only if there was already another woman who was ready to step into her shoes after she is gone. In a majority of the cases of emigration of married women from Thirumarady who left behind husbands and children, the substitute caregiver was the mother-in law. In cases where the mother-in law was seen to be less cooperating in terms of taking care of children then the children were left with the woman’s parents and the husband would continue to stay with his parents in the village. Thus rarely could one find households in which the female migrant

has left-behind her husband and children without an adult female member. In other words, in all the cases of left-behind families another adult woman was present.

Substitute women are mostly women who had relatively lesser capabilities to act autonomously when compared to the female emigrant. The substitute women in majority of the cases were elderly women who mostly belong to the age category of 65-75 and had suffered some old-age related health issues. In most of the cases, it was found that the substitute women were widowed. The substitute women therefore were seen to be dependent and hence enjoyed lesser decision making power. While they have a lesser voice in the decision making processes within the family, the presence of the substitute woman is a critical factor that is considered by families and individual women while making decisions related to emigration. Thus, female emigration of young married women occurs mostly at the cost of older substitute women.

An elderly Syrian Christian woman who stepped in as the caregiver after the migration of her daughter-in-law shared:

“My husband died two years back and ever since I have been dependent on my

son for my needs. My daughter-in-law is a nurse in Germany. She convinced us that she will come back within 2-3 years after making enough money for a comfortable life for the entire family. She requested me to take care of 2 small children in her absence. I wanted to be of some use to my son so I agreed. But now I am also ageing and managing these kids is a task. Sometimes I feel I should not have agreed to take on this responsibility.” (Interview dated 16 January, 2016)

The substitute woman took over the complete responsibility of household work and also took care of the children. The left-behind husbands continue to engage in the same employment as they did before their wives left. Based on a detailed time use data collected for the household head through the survey it was found that on working days, they spend on an average six hours in their workplace and around two hours socialising with friends every day. They do not engage in any household activities unless the substitute caregiver is unwell or away. In households with no female migration, men were found to spend an average of five hours at work and 1.5 hours socialising. Thus, female migration does not have any significant impact on how men in left-behind families utilise their time.

The duration of migration of the woman therefore is largely conditional upon the ability and the willingness of the substitute woman to carry on with household chores. Some of the women who returned back to Thirumarady after working outside India for a few years said that the major reason for their return was the inability of the substitute woman to take care of the household responsibilities due to illness and old age, in some cases the migrants returned after the death of the substitute women. Upon return, unlike male migrants who engaged in some economic activity or the other, many female return migrants were relegated to the confines of household work. The autonomy that they achieved through financial independence was reversed upon their return.

Female emigration has also provided some women with the choice of escaping abject poverty and also in some cases even domestic violence. In a few cases, women decided to escape the violence involved in living with alcoholic men. They borrowed money from different sources to pay for their travel and other expenses. They made arrangements for their children to be sent to their natal families where the migrant woman's parents would take care of the children. The men, in such cases, played very

little role in their decisions. After they migrated, they sent remittances for the care of their children directly to the substitute caregivers. Migration provides a viable option to escape abusive marriages or marriages in which the male member is unable or unwilling to meet the basic needs of the family. In these households women maintain very little or no ties with their husbands after they migrate. The substitute woman has to not only act as the caregiver but also manage the remittances that are sent back by the migrant. An elderly *Naikkar* (a backward community) lady whose daughter in law migrated as domestic worker to Oman said:

“My son is an alcoholic. He stops thinking after he gets drunk. He used to beat his wife and children up almost every day after getting drunk. He is a construction worker and earns around Rs.750 per day. He spends all that money on drinking with his friends and when his wife questions, he beats her up. I think she was fed up of this. She asked for help from Leelamma *chechi*, who belongs to that big house at the end of this road. Her daughter is a nurse in Oman and was looking for a maid to take care of her infant child. My daughter in law did not think twice and agreed to go. She did not even inform my son until a day before she left. She told me that it is important for the

family that she migrates. She sends money to my account for children’s fees and basic expenses. She has not spoken to my son ever since she left and I don’t blame her. Now all his anger is on me. I am fed up.”
(Interview dated on 17 March, 2016)

In summary, while making decisions related to female emigration in the case of married women, families demand that the female emigrant negotiates with another woman within the family to informally take over as “substitute caregiver” and manage household responsibilities in her absence. This guarantees that the emigrating woman’s empowerment remains individualised and her autonomy remains conditional while the gender norms continue to be normalised within the household through the presence of the substitute caregiver.

Conclusion

It is now well established that male migration for work has important consequences like improved economic and social position of the families left behind. Studies have also shown that left-behind wives of migrant workers exercise greater control over day to day management of the household activities (Gulati, 1993). However, it has also lead to increased domesticity of the left-behind wives (Osella and Osella,

2000). The economic pressures in the local economy and the simultaneous increase in demand for female workers especially post-1990s in specific sectors of the global market have resulted in greater migration of women for work from developing countries like India, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Malaysia (Kodoth, 2014). However, much less is known about the economic and social consequences female migration has on the left-behind households and the societies they migrate from. More specifically, very little is known about the gender relations in the households that are dependent on the remittances sent back by female emigrant workers.

The experiences of women in Thirumarady suggest that female emigration is increasingly providing women a real option to be more autonomous especially in cases where the local social context they exist in are marked by entrenched gender norms that restrict women to domesticity. They become the main breadwinners of the family which comes with both some privileges as well as responsibilities. Nonetheless the autonomy they achieve through their mobility is conditional in nature. The conditions demand that the individual autonomy that she achieves through migration does not at any point

pose major challenges to the established gender norms and expectations of the family. Individual empowerment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for collective empowerment. Through individual empowerment, the woman is able to bargain with patriarchy more effectively and acquires the power to articulate and act upon her choices more confidently. In the process, she could even achieve greater individual freedoms at the cost of women with lesser access to resources within her own family. The family demands the female emigrant to actively engage in the process of substituting another woman, who is less resourceful than her, to step in to the role of homemaker that she leaves vacant. This resilience of patriarchy points to the fact that emigrant women are required to compensate for their freedoms they achieve through their migration by finding another woman to fill her shoes.

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