

# Gender Dimensions of Migration in Kerala: Macro and Micro Evidence

*A subtle transformation has occurred among the wives of the migrants that will leave a lasting imprint on Keralan society*

**By K.C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan\***

Women follow men in migration from Kerala; men follow women in migration back to that State. Female migrants are better qualified than male migrants, but a lower proportion of them obtain paid employment. Migration causes the separation of wives and husbands. The numbers are the same among both. Wives rarely migrate without husbands, but husbands migrating without wives accompanying them are more the rule than the exception. Men and women both have their own separate gains and losses arising from migration, but women are less capable of handling them without help from their spouses.

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They have greater problems in dealing with the trauma arising from separation. For many, the trauma is worth the trouble, because, at the end of the day, they become well-equipped to face the world on their own. This article deals with these and other gender differentials in migration. It is an analysis of how women differ from men in the migration process, in terms of levels, trends, characteristics and impacts.

### **Objectives and sources of data**

This article is based on a large research project entitled "Migration from Kerala: Social, economic and demographic consequences", undertaken by the Centre for Development Studies. This research was sponsored by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi under its Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development. In 1998, data for the study were collected through a large-scale field survey covering 10,000 households from 200 *panchayats* (village councils) selected at random from all the 14 districts and all the 61 *taluks* (groups of villages) of the State.

The major objectives of the study included measurement of emigration from Kerala and return migrants, study of the impact of migration on Kerala's demographic transition and on the elderly, women, employment, unemployment and several other economic aspects. One special area of investigation in the study was the consequences of migration for women, especially women who are left by emigrant husbands. This article is concerned with the consequences of migration on Kerala women.

The study collected information on four types of migrants: (a) emigrants or usual members of a household who had emigrated out of Kerala and were living outside India at the time of the survey; (b) return emigrants or usual members of a household who had returned to Kerala after living outside India for a year or more or a lesser period, if the stay outside was for the purpose of study or work or looking for a job; (c) out-migrant or usual members of a household who had migrated out of Kerala and were living outside the State (but within India) at the time of the survey; and (d) return out-migrants or usual members of a household who had returned to Kerala after living outside Kerala (but within India) for a year or more, or for a lesser period, if the stay outside Kerala was for the purpose of study or work or seeking employment.

The emigrants and out-migrants counted in this study had to have roots in Kerala, otherwise there would be no one in Kerala to give information about them. Migration within Kerala was not included in this study.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part brings together general gender issues in migration based on the analysis of data from all 10,000 households studied. The second part deals with an analysis of the data from a special survey conducted in selected districts (Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Palakkad and Kozhikode) on the special problems faced by women whose husbands are living away or have lived away from them as emigrants.

## **Review of literature**

The Government of Kerala conducted three separate surveys at different times to assess the international migration situation and has produced reports on the subject (Department of Economics and Statistics, 1982; 1987; 1994). Although no analysis of the survey data was produced as the data were inaccessible to individual researchers, a few researchers have conducted migration research on macro issues such as remittances, capital flows and return migration based on various official and unofficial documents produced by the Government of Kerala and India such as the Reserve Bank of India (Nayyar, 1994; Issac, 1997; Prakash, 1998). Some others have also conducted small-scale surveys to study the various aspects of migration (Prakash, 1978; Mathew and Nair, 1978; Nair, 1989). This is the first systematic migration survey covering the entire State of Kerala (for more details, see Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan, 2001a; 2001b). Only one study exists in Kerala which assessed the impact of male migration on women. However, this work is based on an in-depth qualitative study of only 10 women in Kerala (Gulati, 1993). The census of India also provides data for analysing inter-state migration, but not international migration (Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan, 2000). Thus, this large-scale survey was undertaken to assess international migration in Kerala.

## **Main findings**

### **Sex differentials in migration**

The total number (stock) of migrants in Kerala in 1998 (emigrants, out-migrants, return emigrants and return out-migrants) was 3,752,000; of that number, women constituted only 654,000 or 9.6 per cent. However, their share varies considerably between internal and external migration (table 1).

In 1998, the total number of female emigrants was 126,000, out of a total of 1,362,000, and the number of female return emigrants was 81,000, out of a total of 739,000. Thus, for both emigration and return emigration, only one out of every 10 migrants was a woman; emigration from and back to Kerala is essentially a male affair.

**Table 1. Gender composition of Kerala migrants, 1998**

<b>A. Onward migrants</b>	<b>Emi-grants</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>	<b>Out-migrants</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>
Males	1,235,426	90.7	524,796	75.9	1,760,222	85.7
Females	126,528	9.3	166,899	24.1	293,727	14.3
<b>B. Return migrants to Kerala</b>	<b>Return emigrants</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>	<b>Return out-migrants</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Perce-ntage</b>
Males	58,733	89.1	678,494	70.8	1,331,227	78.7
Females	80,512	10.9	280,332	29.2	360,844	21.3

Women have higher representation among internal migrants. Among the onward migrants, one in four is a woman, 167,000 females and 525,000 males. The number of female return out-migrants was 280,000, compared with 679,000 males. Thus, females had a higher representation (29 per cent) among the return out-migrants.

Female return out-migrants exceeded female out-migrants by 113,000. Corresponding to every 100 female emigrants there were only 64 female return-emigrants; on the other hand, corresponding to every 100 female out-migrants there were 167 female return out-migrants.

### **Female migrants by community**

More than half the number of all emigrants were Muslims; however, Muslims contributed only about a quarter of the total number of female emigrants. The highest proportion of female emigrants was among the Syrian Christian community (27 per cent). Together with Roman Catholics, the Christian community contributed nearly half the number of female emigrants. Nairs had a relatively low proportion of females among the emigrants, but Muslims had the lowest proportion (table 2).

About one fifth of the emigrants from the Christian community were females. On the other hand, less than 5 per cent of the Muslim emigrants were females. The corresponding proportion among Nairs was not much higher.

Among the various communities, the highest proportion of female out-migrants to total out-migrants was among the Christians, totalling some 38 per cent each among the Syrian and Latin Christians. The lowest proportion was among the Muslims, at only 3 per cent. About one third of the female out-migrants belonged to the Syrian Christian community. On the other hand, less than 2 per cent were Muslims.

**Table 2. Female and male migrants by community in Kerala**

	Percentage			Females as percentage of total
	Males	Females	Total	
<b>Emigrants by caste and religion</b>				
Scheduled caste/scheduled tribe	1.4	2.1	1.5	12.9
Ezhawas	7.5	9.7	7.7	11.7
Nairs	14.0	8.2	13.4	5.7
Syrian Christian	10.6	21.2	12.1	20.8
Roman Catholic	7.4	19.0	8.4	20.9
Muslim	52.0	25.1	49.5	4.7
Others	7.1	8.7	7.3	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9.3</b>
<b>Out-migrants by sex and religion</b>				
Scheduled caste/scheduled tribe	4.9	4.5	4.8	22.6
Ezhawas	21.2	18.1	20.4	21.4
Nairs	24.2	14.3	21.8	15.9
Syrian Christian	17.1	32.8	20.9	38.0
Roman Catholic	8.9	17.7	11.0	38.8
Muslim	15.6	1.5	12.2	3.0
Others	8.2	10.9	8.8	29.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>24.2</b>

### Destination of female migrants

The destination of the largest proportion of emigrants, both men and women, was Saudi Arabia. However, the proportion of females was smaller, totalling 21.5 for females, compared with 39.1 for males. The United Arab Emirates was next, Dubai alone accounting for 14 per cent. The other destinations in the United Arab Emirates were: Sharjha (8.2 per cent) and Abu Dhabi (7.7 per cent). Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain together accounted for 31.8 per cent. The proportion of emigrants to the United States of America formed another 9.2 per cent.

In relative terms, the difference between males and females was the largest in the case of emigration to the United States. While only 1.5 per cent of males went to the United States, as many as 9.2 per cent of female emigrants went to that destination. A similar situation was observed with respect to Kuwait and Qatar. In many of the Persian Gulf countries, emigrant workers are not given family visas for wives and children unless they earn a certain income level set by the respective Governments. This greatly contributes, especially in the Persian Gulf region, to the number of wives left behind at home (Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan, 2001). However, this is not true in the case of the United States, where there is family migration.

The largest number of male and female out-migrants went to Maharashtra State. The principal determinant of the destination of female out-migrants was the destination of male out-migrants. The major destinations of out-migrants were Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and the city of Delhi. The largest male-female differential was in Delhi. While only 7.7 per cent of male out-migrants went to Delhi, almost twice as many (14.8 per cent) female out-migrants did so. Andhra Pradesh is another State in which the proportion of female out-migrants from Kerala (6.1 per cent) was much higher than the proportion of male out-migrants (3.8 per cent)

### **Return emigration**

The number of female return emigrants was estimated to be 81,000, or about 11 per cent of the total number of return emigrants. Return female out-migrants numbered some 280,000, constituting 29.2 per cent of the total return out-migrants. Thus, the number of return out-migrants was much larger than all other migration streams. The return out-migrants numbered 2.2 times the female emigrants, 1.7 times more than out-migrants, and 3.5 times more than return emigrants. A comparison between the number of female out-migrants and the number of female return out-migrants is particularly informative. While the number of female out-migrants was only 167,000, as many as 280,000 female out-migrants returned to Kerala.

### **Educational attainment of female migrants**

Female emigrants were found to be better educated than male emigrants. As long as emigrants earn more money abroad compared to their counterparts in Kerala, parents will approve the marriage of their educated daughters with less educated men. This is purely for economic reasons. Among those who reported their educational attainment, 28.2 per cent had a degree, while the corresponding proportion among male emigrants was only 9 per cent (table 3). While about 66 per cent of the female emigrants had passed the secondary level of education, only 38 per cent of the male emigrants had attained that level.

Looked at from a different perspective, it was found that, of emigrants as a whole, 7.4 per cent were female; but among degree-holding emigrants as many as 20 per cent were female. The male-female differential in educational attainment by emigrants was 28.1 per cent.

Similar differentials were also noted among out-migrants (table 4). Female out-migrants had higher levels of educational attainment than males. About 21 per cent of the female out-migrants had a degree, compared with only 11 per cent among male out-migrants. Among females, there was an approximate 11 percentage point advantage with respect to only secondary level of education. However, the overall differential between male and female

**Table 3. Distribution of Kerala emigrants by sex and educational attainment**

Education level	Males	Females	(Percentage)
			Females as percentage of total
Illiterate	0.7	0.7	7.1
Literate without schooling	1.0	0.7	5.3
Primary (incomplete)	3.3	5.4	11.4
Primary	11.4	3.4	2.3
Lower secondary	45.2	23.5	4.0
Secondary	29.4	38.3	9.5
Degree	9.0	28.2	20.0
	100	100	7.4

*Note:* Differential index = 28.1. This is the sum of the positive (or negative) differences between the percentage distributions of male and female emigrants.

out-migrants was less than that among emigrants (only 20.4 per cent among out-migrants, compared with 28.1 per cent among emigrants).

### **Economic activity**

As expected, the economic activity rate was lower among females than among males. The same relationship held at all stages: before migration in Kerala, after migration at the destinations and after return to Kerala. The differential was largest among return migrants. Females tended to drop out of economic activity after a stint at emigration or out-migration. At the destinations, the gender differential among emigrants was only 45.3 per cent before emigration, but as high as 76.3 per cent after return to Kerala. Similarly, the differential among out-migrants was only 31.3 per cent before out-migration, but as much as 64.8 per cent after return to Kerala. Thus,

**Table 4. Distribution of Kerala out-migrants by sex and educational attainment**

Educational level	Males	Females	(Percentage)
			Females as percentage of total
Illiterate	0.9	0.0	0.0
Literate without schooling	0.8	0.4	16.7
Primary (incomplete)	1.2	0.9	16.7
Primary	7.2	4.3	14.5
Lower secondary	34.2	17.8	12.7
Secondary	44.8	55.8	26.2
Degree	11.3	21.0	34.5
	100	100	22.1

*Note:* Differential index = 20.7.

**Table 5. Occupational distribution of Kerala males and females before emigration, at destination and after return**

	Before emigration		At destination		After return	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Government and semi-government	2.5	11.8	3.2	8.9	2.7	21.1
Private sector	15.6	30.3	41.2	61.1	6.0	26.3
Self-employment and unpaid family worker	15.9	3.9	4.1	2.2	47.2	21.1
Agricultural labourer	2.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	5.2	0.0
Non-agricultural labourer	36.9	7.9	50.4	22.2	31.3	10.6
Job seekers	27.1	46.1	0.5	5.6	7.6	21.1
All occupations	100	100	100	100	100	100

emigration and out-migration tended to increase labour force participation by females. However, their return was associated with lower rates.

### Sex differentials in occupation

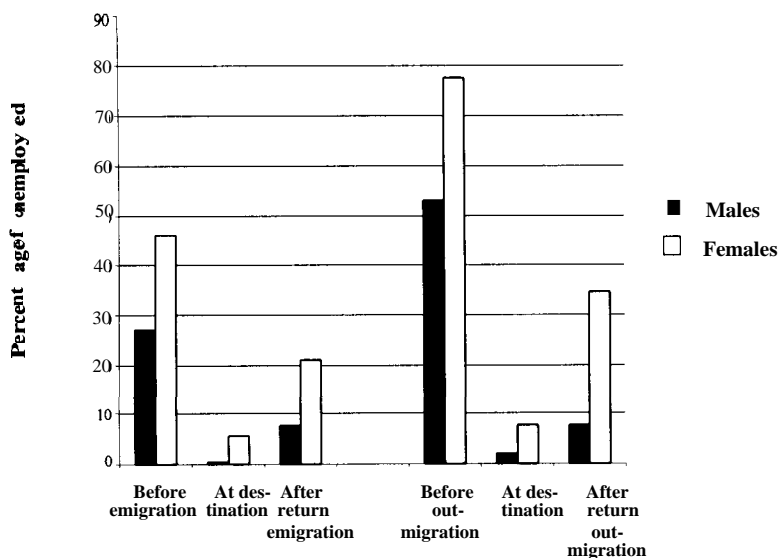
Considerable sex differentials exist in the occupational profiles of the labour force (those not in the labour force have not been included in the calculation of rates). The proportion of the unemployed is much higher among female emigrants as well as out-migrants. The same pattern of sex differentials holds among migrants before migration, among migrants at their destination, and among return migrants. Similarly, the proportion of the labour force in the private sector is higher among females before migration, after migration and after return to Kerala. Females are over-represented in government and semi-government employment. On the other hand, females are under-represented in the labour force in self-employment, and among agricultural and non-agricultural labourers (tables 5 and 6).

**Table 6. Occupational distribution of Kerala male and female out-migrants, before emigration, at destination and after return**

	Before migration		At destination		After return	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Government and semi-government	4.7	4.0	21.7	15.2	14.6	20.5
Private sector	8.7	11.2	38.0	69.7	8.9	6.3
Self-employment and unpaid family worker	9.4	4.8	10.9	3.0	31.0	22.3
Agricultural labourer	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.6	8.9
Non-agricultural labourer	23.0	2.4	27.5	4.5	30.5	7.1
Job seekers	53.1	77.6	2.0	7.6	7.6	34.6
All occupations	100	100	100	100	100	100



**Figure 1. Percentage of unemployed in Kerala by sex and migration status**



### Unemployment among females

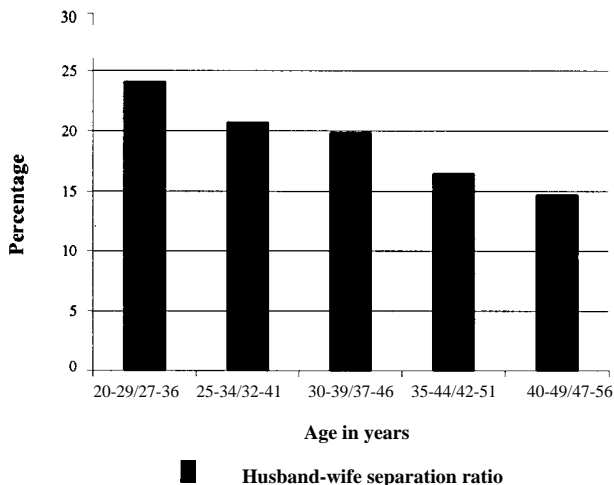
Almost half (46 per cent) of the economically active female emigrants were “job seekers” before emigration (figure 1). The corresponding percentage among the males was only 27 per cent. The percentages were much lower at the destination, but the differentials persisted: 5.6 per cent among females and 0.5 per cent among males. Among the return emigrants, the level of unemployment was higher, but the pattern of differentials persisted: 21.1 per cent among females and 7.6 per cent among males. The pattern of sex differentials among the out-migrants was similar but at higher levels of unemployment.

### Separation of spouses: excess of married women

One of the major impacts of migration on women was separation from husbands who emigrated or moved to other States in India, leaving their wives and children at home.

The number of married men and women in the sample totalled 10,712 and 12,253, respectively, giving an excess of 1,541 married females. The difference, as a proportion of the number of married women, that is, husband-

**Figure 2. Approximate percentage of Kerala wives separated from husbands, by age**



*Note:* These percentages assume that the husband is older than the wife by seven years, and that the husbands of women aged 20-29 years are all aged 27-36 years.

wife separation ratio (HWSR), was 12.6 per cent. Thus, a minimum of 12.6 per cent of the married women in Kerala were living apart from their husbands. Applying the ratio to the total number of married females in the State, 981,000 married women in Kerala were living apart from their husbands.

The extent of spousal separation varied considerably by age of the wife (figure 2), decreasing as age advanced. For example, it was about 24 per cent among women aged 20-29 years, but less than 15 per cent for higher age groups. In about 15 per cent of the households, the number of married females was higher than the number of married males. The percentage varied considerably from district to district and from community to community. The highest HWSR was in Malappuram district (28 per cent) and the lowest in Idukki district (1.7 per cent). The separation ratio was more than 30 per cent among Muslims and only 4.4 per cent among the scheduled castes.

In households where the number of married females exceeded the number of married males, 69 per cent had migrants and 31 per cent had no migrants. Among households where the number of married males exceeded the number of married females, only 6 per cent had migrants and 94 per cent had no

**Table 7. Age distribution of Kerala “Gulf wives and husbands”**

Age (years)	(Percentage)	
	Wife	Husband
20-24	11.0	0.0
25-29	21.7	4.8
30-34	22.9	19.4
35-39	20.0	24.6
40-44	13.6	18.9
45-49	7.6	17.7
50+	3.3	14.6
Total	100	100
<b>Average age of wife</b>	<b>34.0 years</b>	
<b>Average age of husband</b>		<b>40.9 years</b>
<b>Difference</b>		<b>6.9 years</b>

migrants. Viewed another way, among households with migrants, 67 per cent had more married females than married men. Among households without migrants, only 6 per cent of the households had more married females than married males. These figures indicate that migration was the major underlying factor for the existence of more married females than married males in many households in Kerala.

### “Gulf wives”

The term “Gulf wives” refers to married women whose husbands are, or have been migrants. They include women whose husbands were migrants at the time of the survey and whose husbands had returned after migration to the Persian Gulf countries. The consequences of migration for those women would be different from those experienced by women in non-migrant households or who had themselves been migrants. Therefore, a special survey was conducted in 8 of the 14 districts to elicit information on the consequences of emigration on Gulf wives. Altogether, 891 women were included in this special survey. A little more than half the number were wives of emigrants (52 per cent) and the balance (48 per cent) were wives of return emigrants.

### Characteristics of Gulf wives

The Gulf wives were neither very young nor very old. Nearly 80 per cent of them were in the 25-year to 40-year age group. The average age of wives of return emigrants was slightly higher (35.7 years) than that of the wives of current emigrants (32.5 years). The largest proportion of wives of emigrants was in the 30-year to 34-year age group, with the largest number of wives of return migrants being in the 35 to 39 year age group (table 7).

**Table 8. Difference in age between husband and wife**

Difference (years)	Percentage
Less than 2	5.2
2-4	12.9
4-6	19.3
6-8	20.8
8-10	20.5
10-12	13.9
12+	8.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

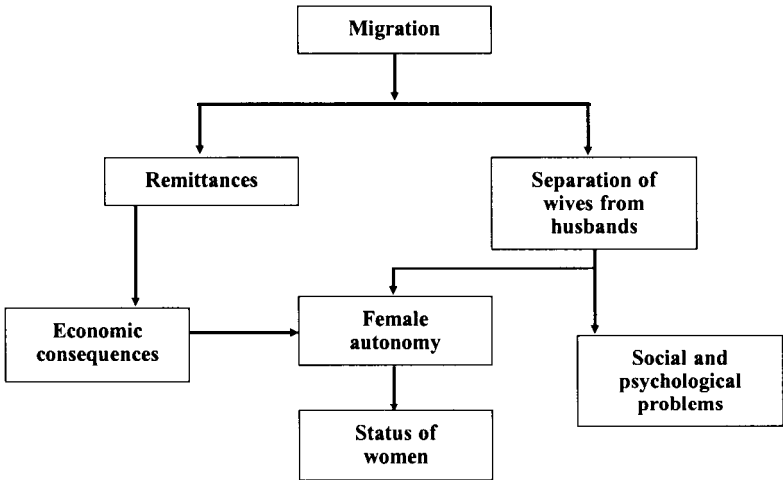
The husbands of Gulf wives were, on average, seven years older. This difference is slightly more than the average difference among the general population. There were no cases of a wife being older than her husband, but there were a few cases (8.3 per cent) where the husband was older by more than 12 years (table 8).

The average age of Gulf wives at marriage was 20.5 years, slightly lower than the State average, while the average age of their husbands was 27.5 years, slightly higher than the State average. The average was slightly lower among wives of return migrants, compared with that of the wives of emigrants. Twenty-one per cent of the Gulf wives were married before the legal age of 18 years, but only 1.5 per cent of the Gulf husbands were married before they were 20 years old (table 9).

**Table 9. Age at marriage of Kerala Gulf wives and husbands**

Age at marriage (years)	(Percentage)	
	Wife	Husband
Below 16	7.4	0.1
16-17	13.9	0.4
18-19	21.9	0.9
20-21	20.7	5.7
22-23	16.6	10.4
24-25	9.1	16.9
26-27	4.5	18.1
28-29	3.4	17.2
30-31	1.7	13.8
32-33	0.4	8.6
Above 33	0.4	7.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>27.5</b>

**Figure 3. Schematic diagram of the impact of migration on Gulf wives**



### **Impact of migration on Gulf wives**

The impact of migration on Gulf wives has made itself felt in several ways, but principally through remittances and husband-wife physical separation (figure 3). Remittances have brought in considerable income to Gulf wives and their households. Increased income has led to several changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns, such as ownership of land, housing and household amenities; the nutritional and health status of the members of the households; social status, as reflected in the relationship of the family and the community; and the quality of children's education. Women who had previously been accustomed to a protected lifestyle have been called upon to take charge of a number of household tasks, both within the house and outside it, as a result of their husbands' migration. Women who had been unaccustomed to handling large sums of money have become responsible for the financial management of the household. They have had to open bank accounts and approach public offices for a variety of purposes. Women who have succeeded in taking on the additional responsibilities have developed new expertise and self-confidence. They have become more autonomous and have risen in social status. Others who have failed to rise to the challenge have become targets of displeasure among their husbands and other members of their families and have even developed social and psychological problems.

**Table 10a. Adverse consequences of migration reported by Gulf wives in Kerala in terms of choice**

Adverse consequences	(Percentage)	
	First choice	1-3 choices
Loneliness	43.4	28.2
Added responsibilities	5.3	31.6
Worries about future	3.1	5.9
Debt	10.6	8.3
Less security	0.0	0.3
Children's health	0.2	0.3
Mental anxiety	2.1	2.6
Things not done properly	0.4	0.5
Land dispute	0.2	0.1
No financial gains	12.9	10.2
Dependent on others	1.2	12.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The impact of migration on women can be positive, negative or both, depending on the ability and background, as well as the family environment in which the women are placed. A starting point for examining the impact is provided by the answers given by Gulf wives to the question about problems they have faced and the benefits they have received from the migration of their husbands. All the Gulf wives in the sample were asked a general question about the good and the bad things they had experienced as a result of the migration of their husbands. They were asked to list three good experiences and three bad experiences in their order of importance. The answers on adverse experiences are detailed in tables 10a and 10b.

**Table 10b. First choice of adverse consequences of migration reported by Gulf wives in Kerala by age group**

Adverse consequences	(Percentage)	
	First choice	
	Below 30 years	30+ years
Loneliness	55.0	39.9
Added responsibilities	15.0	28.4
Worries about future	1.7	3.5
Debt	11.7	10.3
Less security	0.0	0.0
Children's health	0.0	0.3
Mental anxiety	5.0	2.0
Things not done properly	0.0	0.5
Land dispute	0.0	0.3
No financial gains	10.8	13.6
Dependent on others	0.8	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

## Adverse consequences of migration

As tables 10a and 10b indicate, loneliness is by far the leading problem, followed by added responsibilities, indebtedness owing to loans raised at the time of emigration, inadequate financial returns from emigration, and anxiety.

### *Loneliness*

In the multiple-choice question, 43 per cent of the women reported loneliness as their most important problem. However, if the first three choices are combined, the proportion who reported loneliness declines to 28 per cent, which is lower than the number of respondents who felt that “additional responsibilities” constituted their major problem .

More than half the number (55 per cent) of the younger wives (aged below 30 years) felt that loneliness was their main problem. Among the older women the proportion was lower at only 40 per cent, but loneliness retained the leading position. Loneliness of wives is thus observed to be the most important, but unfortunately, unavoidable consequence of emigration from the State.

Under the current pattern of emigration in Kerala, the separation of married emigrant men from their wives lasts for several years. In this study, the extent of loneliness was reckoned in terms of three measures: (a) the number of women living apart from their husbands; (b) the period of separation; and (c) the frequency of communication between husbands and wives.

In a previous section, it was indicated that 981,000 women (one out of every eight married women) were beset with the problem of living apart from their husbands. Classification of wives by age indicated that the number of married women aged 20-29 years was larger than the number of married men aged 27- 36 years by 24 per cent (the interval between the age at marriage of men and women was assumed to be seven years on average). The husband-wife physical separation ratio decreased with the age of the woman, but it remained at about 15 per cent even in the age group of 40-49 years. Thus, the problem of separation of wives from husbands was clearly more severe among younger women than older women,

The length of separation is another measure of the HWSR problem. Table 11 gives the distribution of Gulf wives according to the period of separation. It shows that in 2.4 per cent of the Gulf wives, the husband emigrated within a few days of his marriage. In about 13 per cent, the husband emigrated within a month after marriage. In a very large proportion of cases (about 45 per cent), the husband emigrated in the first year of marriage. However, the departure of the husband occurred more than five years after marriage in about one third of the cases.

**Table 11. Interval between marriage and first emigration from Kerala**

(Percentage)

Interval between marriage and first migration (in months)	All women	Women aged below 30 years	Women aged 30+ years
Less than a month	2.4	2.7	2.3
1	10.1	12.5	9.2
2	12.7	20.1	10.0
3	7.7	14.7	5.2
4	3.7	6.3	2.8
5	1.4	1.8	1.3
6 months	2.0	2.7	1.8
7-12	3.6	2.7	3.9
12-24	7.7	14.7	5.2
24-36	6.5	5.3	6.6
36-48	4.8	4.9	4.7
48-60	4.0	2.7	4.5
60+	32.0	5.8	41.5
Husband migrated before marriage	1.3	2.2	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Younger women were affected by the separation problem more frequently than older women. In the case of half the younger women, the husband emigrated within the first three months after marriage. The corresponding percentage among the older women (aged above 30 years) was only 27 per cent.

The main message to be drawn from the table is not completely contrary to the commonly held view. Our data support the commonly-held notion that in Kerala, a fairly large number of Gulf brides were left alone by their migrant husbands within days or a month of their marriage. But for the majority, the emigration of the husbands occurred several years after the marriage.

The interval between the first emigration and the first homecoming is equally relevant in assessing the degree of loneliness of Gulf wives. The longer the interval, the higher the degree of loneliness. The average interval is about two years, but here again, the average masks the intensity of loneliness. For example, in more than 40 per cent of the cases, the interval was more than two years (table 12).

There is little that the husband or the wife can do, under current conditions, to avoid physical separation. However, there are several ways of mitigating the pain of separation and lessen the feeling of loneliness, such as communication and family and community networks. Periodic remittances, gifts and messages received from husbands through visits from friends returning on leave also help to lessen the severity of the problem.



**Table 12. Distribution of “Gulf wives” in Kerala by the interval between first emigration after marriage and first homecoming**

<b>Interval (months)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0-6	3.9
7-12	12.9
13-24	39.5
25-36	26.9
37-48	10.8
49-60	3.9
60+	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

### *Communication between a Gulfwife and her husband*

One way to ameliorate a woman’s problem of loneliness, mental strain and misunderstanding is to have constant contact with her husband through letters, telephone calls and other means of communication. In this matter, the Gulf wives from Kerala are fairly well placed. Almost all Gulf wives indicated that they regularly communicated with their migrant husbands. They used all available means of communication, the most common being letters and telephone calls. Nearly 70 per cent of the Gulf wives used both letters and telephones for communicating with their husbands. The remaining women used only letters.

The majority of the husbands wrote letters at least once in two weeks. Another 36 per cent wrote once a month. The husbands called their wives by telephone less frequently. Only 37 per cent of the respondents reported having received telephone calls from their husbands. Thirty per cent had never received telephone calls.

The frequency of letter writing by Gulf wives to their emigrant husbands followed the same pattern as that of the husbands: 42 per cent wrote once in two weeks and 34 per cent sent mail once a month. Thus, the frequency of letter writing by the wife was dependent on the frequency of letters received from the husband.

Frequent communication links between husband and wife therefore play a major role in easing the severity of loneliness and avoiding its extreme consequences.

### *Increased responsibilities*

“Increased responsibilities” was another common complaint of the Gulf wives. Tables 10a and 10b show that (all the three choices together) about 32

per cent of the Gulf wives felt “added responsibility” to be their main problem; loneliness came second, with 28 per cent. However, if we consider the first choice only, “added responsibilities” takes second place, as only 25 per cent of the Gulf wives mentioned it as a problem. On the other hand, 43 per cent mentioned loneliness as a problem. Among the younger women, “added responsibilities” was much less important, with only 15 per cent mentioning it as a problem. Among the older women, the proportion was higher (28 per cent), but even among them, it stood only second to loneliness. Increased responsibility occurs in several areas, the most important among them being management of children’s education.

### *Education of children*

One of the major additional responsibilities of Gulf wives that resulted from their husbands’ emigration was the management of their children’s education. Before migration, the husbands were largely in charge of their children’s education; after the husband’s departure, the wife had to take over the responsibility.

Almost all Gulf wives had children. Nearly 80 per cent had two or more children, 3 per cent had four or more children. The average was, however, much smaller, at 2.2 children.

About 74 per cent of the women had children who were students. Most of the children were attending school classes 1 to 10. Nearly two fifths of them were attending lower primary school. Thus, the children of Gulf wives fall within age groups that demand concentrated attention from their mothers.

About 41 per cent of the children were taking private tuition, which necessitated the mother arranging tuition and making arrangements for the transportation of children to and from the place of tuition. Most of the students travelled to school on foot or by public transport. Travel in a family-owned vehicle was limited to a small percentage of children. The majority of children attending private tuition travelled independently. However, in about 8 per cent of the cases, their mothers took them to and from the place of tuition.

Most housewives helped their children with learning. Among the women whose husbands were, or had been, emigrants, more than 75 per cent helped their children with their homework. This was seen as a major added responsibility.

Taking care of children’s education is not the only added responsibility they have taken upon themselves. Managing family finances and remittances received from husbands, keeping contacts with husbands abroad and taking care of the health of the members of the family are a few of the other added responsibilities.

### *Increased anxiety: problems with in-laws*

About 6 per cent of the Gulf wives mentioned that one of the problems arising from their husbands' migration was a heightened anxiety level about the family and its future. About 3 per cent reported a high level of anxiety as their major problem. Young Gulf wives were new to their husbands' families, and had little time to get to know them before their husbands' departure on emigration. It is understandable that they encountered serious mental problems. With regard to the specific question of whether they had any problems with in-laws, more than 25 per cent gave a positive answer.

Problems could also arise between the husband and the wife due to living apart for several years at a stretch. However, only a very small proportion of the wives (2.1 per cent) mentioned that some misunderstanding had occurred with their husbands. They did not, however, discuss the matter with strangers.

Another point of strain was misunderstandings with the family of the husband. However, only 8.5 per cent mentioned that they had problems with members of the husband's family. What little misunderstanding there was mainly concerned financial matters.

One problem for the Gulf wife occurred during periods of illness of family members, particularly in cases where there was no one else in the family to take the sick person for medical consultation and treatment. This problem was observed, however, to be more imaginary than real in most cases. In an overwhelming majority (two thirds) of cases, the relatives had provided the needed services. It had been the sole responsibility of the wife of the emigrant in only 31 per cent of the cases.

The effect of the absence of the father on the education of his children is also likely to be serious. Indebtedness incurred in meeting the expenses of husbands' migration and inability to repay the debt was another problem about which a significant number of women indicated concern.

Specific reference was made to the effect of migration on children. Only 8 per cent of the women surveyed felt that because the father was away the children had become a problem to the mother.

### *Benefits from migration of husbands*

As stated above, the women respondents were asked about the benefits accruing to them from the migration of husbands. According to 56.3 per cent of the women, financial gain was the leading benefit from emigration (table 13).

Seventy-five per cent of the women noted that the best part of their husbands' emigration was the financial gain. Almost all the beneficial aspects

**Table 13. Distribution of Gulf wives in Kerala by gains accruing from emigration**

Benefit	(Percentage)		
	All	Young women	Older women
Financial gain	56.3	64.7	53.1
Able to own a house	21.7	19.5	30.2
Able to own ornaments	1.6	0.8	1.8
Able to buy land	1.2	1.5	1.2
Able to improve nutrition	0.2	0.0	0.2
Able to help relatives	2.6	3.0	2.5
Able to pay back debt	6.0	9.0	5.1
Improved lifestyle	1.8	0.8	2.1
Better education	2.1	0.0	2.8
Others	0.5	0.8	0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

of emigration were economic in nature: ownership of land and houses, acquisition of jewellery, ability to help relatives, capacity to clear debts, and so forth. The economic gains came mainly through remittances.

#### *Remittances*

In addition to the fact that most husbands wrote letters or made telephone calls to their wives, they also sent remittances home on a regular basis. In the 12-month period prior to the survey, 60 per cent of the Gulf wives had received remittances. The average amount received by way of remittance was Rs. 21,141 (1997 exchange rate: approximately Rs. 46/US\$ 1) when women who did not receive remittances were included. However, the amount increased to Rs. 34,924 when only those who received remittances were considered (table 14).

**Table 14. Distribution of Gulf wives in Kerala by annual remittances received**

Remittance per year	Percentage of Gulf wives
Below Rs. 10,000	2.0
10,000-20,000	7.5
20,000-30,000	14.0
30,000-40,000	15.4
40,000-50,000	9.8
Above 50,000	11.9
Not sent	39.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 15. Distribution of Gulf wives in Kerala according to disposition of own incomes**

Category of use	First choice	All choices
According to husband's directions	50.7	19.7
Routine consumption requirements of the family	14.9	11.1
Emergency needs	9.1	13.5
Savings	0.4	0.8
Religious purposes	15.9	20.4
Buying ornaments	8.9	25.7
Other uses	0.1	8.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Most of the remittances were spent by the recipient wives in accordance with the directions of their husbands (59 per cent). However, in about 35 per cent of the cases, expenditure was made according to the recipients' own discretion. This fact indicates the considerable degree of autonomy enjoyed by the Gulf wives.

### **Women's autonomy**

The study collected several pieces of information regarding the autonomy of Gulf wives. One important aspect of female autonomy is the role of the wife in managing the finances of the household. In reply to the question of who managed the family's financial matters, nearly 60 per cent of the women said that they did so themselves. Another 16 per cent said they followed their husbands' directions. In about 22 per cent of the households, it was the husband's family who managed the household finances.

More than 50 per cent of the respondent Gulf wives had some property in their name, either a house or a piece of land. About one third of them had houses. About 25 per cent some source of income of their own. Most of the personal income came from agriculture (43 per cent). The other major sources were wages (22 per cent) and salaries (17 per cent). Much of the money was used for the routine consumption requirements of the household, meeting emergencies and religious purposes (table 15).

A fairly large proportion of the Gulf wives said they kept bank accounts (69 per cent), but only a few had joined chit funds or similar financial investment schemes. About 75 per cent made independent decisions on matters of spending. In some cases, they consulted their husbands. In 10 per cent of the cases, permission was sought from the husband's family.

## Conclusions

There are both positive and negative consequences for Gulf wives as a result of their husbands' emigration. On balance, the situation was clearly defined by the respondent through their answers to the following two questions concerning the net effect of migration.

1. *"Would it not be nice if your husband left his Gulf job and returned home?"*

Surprisingly, nearly 60 per cent of the women answered that they really wished that their husbands would leave their Gulf jobs and return home. For them, the added responsibilities and the loneliness weighed too much. But for the other 40 per cent of respondents, the economic benefits outweighed the burdens and privations resulting from the absence of their husband.

2. *"If you have a daughter of marriageable age, whom would you like her to marry? Somebody working in Kerala, somebody working in another State in India, or somebody working in the Gulf countries?"*

Most of the respondents reported that they would like their daughters to marry persons working in Kerala (an overwhelming 83 per cent). The next choice was for persons working abroad (14 per cent). Surprisingly, very few wanted a husband for their daughters from among persons working outside Kerala but within India.

Thus, in spite of the huge increase in family income, women who had gone through the trauma of separation from their husbands did not want their daughters to go through the same experience.

The reason given for opting for a person working in Kerala was the idea that life in Kerala was more comfortable than anywhere else. Income was not the main consideration. A job in Kerala was likely to provide a better future than a job outside Kerala.

The women who opted for sons-in-law working in Gulf countries were of the view that a Gulf job ensured a brighter future for the family. Surprisingly, economic considerations were not specifically mentioned as a factor in their preference patterns.

How to interpret these figures? Having gone through the experience as a Gulf wife they appeared to have second thoughts about their husbands' emigration. It was acceptable from an economic point of view, but not acceptable when all the related factors were taken into consideration.

Those who had gone through the trauma of separation would prefer a job in Kerala for their husbands. For them, all that glittered in the Arabian sands was not gold. Considerable sacrifices had to be made on the part of the migrants themselves, as well as by their wives and children back in Kerala.

However, there is still another side to the whole question of balance. What is described above is the viewpoint of individual Gulf wives. The picture is different from the viewpoint of society in general. More important than the visible economic benefits to the Gulf wives, but partly as a result of them, are the subtle changes in the level of their self-confidence and ability to get things done in a man's world. Loneliness, mental strain, hard work, minor problems with in-laws and children all have to be faced; however, the Gulf wives will have developed an innate capacity to get things done, not only within the household but also in the community. The existence of International Subscriber Dialling and email booths in every part of the State have proved to be very useful in preventing the problem of loneliness from getting out of hand. The husband may be absent, but his helping hand is close by at the other end of a telephone line. The husband's absence, increased economic resources at the disposal of the wife and the ability to communicate with him whenever needed have all become instrumental in transforming a shy, dependent woman into a self-confident autonomous manager with a status equal to that of any man in the neighbourhood. She has also gained a larger vision of the world around her. The subtle transformation that has taken place among the Gulf wives will leave a more lasting imprint on Keralan society than any of the material changes that migration has brought about.

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