

What is the impact of international female labour migration on the left-at-home husband and fathers in East Java, Indonesia?

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Abstract

Female international labour migration has been increasing over the past two decades. In Southeast Asia, countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have witnessed the feminization of migration. In Indonesia for example, an estimated 80% of the individuals migrating outside of the country are women. These are countries where traditional gender roles are still undergoing transformation. Yet, the paradox of traditional societies in which the married woman leaves her husband and children behind and migrates to work and earn money has not received adequate attention in the scholarship. The aim of this paper is to examine the social and economic impact of international female labour migration of married women in Indonesia on the left-behind husbands and fathers. This research utilises quantitative and qualitative data from the project 'What happens to the family when women migrate?' which was funded by the British Council Institutional Links grant, a mixed-method study investigating the socio-economic impacts of female international labour migration on household members in Indonesia. The quantitative data are derived from household surveys conducted in 2015 in two village case study sites situated in East Java. Husbands of international female migrants were recruited from the household surveys and approached for the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using QRS NVivo. The study found that left-behind husbands undertake domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare. This is in addition to working full time. While most husbands try their best to cope with the absence of their wives, other highlighted the negative impact that the migration had which in some cases led to loneliness, high levels of stress, divorce and extramarital affairs.

Introduction

The international labour migration of females constitutes approximately half of all international migrants globally (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2006). In some Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, the number of international female labour migrants now outnumber male migration. International labour migration of the mother/wife, even if temporary, has unforeseen social and economic consequences on the family left behind (Asis et al. 2004). First, it separates family members and in doing so alters the ideals of a “family”. Second, the absence of the mother has been found to lead to a transformation of gender roles for the fathers left behind who assume the dual role of both mother and father to children (Inhorn et al. 2015).

Literature review

There are more studies on the impact of labour migration of the husband on the wife/family left behind as compared to the impact of migration of the wife on left-behind husbands and children. Yet, there is growing evidence to suggest that the migration of married women transforms gender roles of the husbands left behind (Hugo 2002, Save the Children 2006). The woman’s role as wife and mother are constrained when she emigrates for work. In the absence of the wife/mother, previous studies have shown that husbands albeit with the help of female relatives and elderly children assume the duties previously undertaken by the wives (Lam and Yeoh 2015, Thao 2015). However, a distinction is rarely made in the literature about the impact of female migration on the husband and the father. These two areas are usually analysed together. However, while they are not mutually exclusive because husbands can be fathers, there needs to be an appreciation that there may be differences in the ways that female migration impacts these two roles. Therefore, the literature review is categorised into the impact of female migration on the husband, left-behind-fathers and breadwinner.

The husband

International migration disassociates wives from their husbands often for very long periods of time. This separation of partner’s inevitably impacts the relationship and may potentially be emotionally stressful (Wilkerson et al. 2009, Noble 2015). How does the husband and wife communicate when the woman is a transnational migrant? What are the coping mechanisms used by the husband to deal with the temporary loss of his partner? Do they feel a sense of loss and anxiety after their wife departs? These are important questions that necessitate investigation because marriage is built around companionship. Married husbands ‘often spoke of the loss they felt when their wives left’ in a study conducted among families living in transnational households in the Philippines (Asis et al. 2004). In another study, Graham et al. (2015) examined the mental health of those who stay behind in Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam to care for the children of overseas migrants.

They found that all stay behind carers in the Indonesian sample are more likely than carers in no-migrant households to suffer common mental disorders. It could be that the economic motivation for migrating in the first place enables couples not to become too sentimental after the wife migrates. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how husbands respond to the temporary absence of their wives.

The father

When the wife leaves the husband behind with children, studies have shown that the husband adapts to their new role as father-careers / stay-at-home fathers (Inhorn et al. 2015). Migration of the mother changes the “ideal” family structure of conjugal family which comprises of mother, father and children to one which typically includes left-behind father, children and possibly some extended family member such as a grandparent. The role of the father is also transformed after the mother migrates (Hugo 1995, 2002, Inhorn et al. 2015). A number of qualitative studies have shown that fathers become left-at-home fathers, father-carers and stay-at-home fathers after the transnational migration of the mother of their children (Save the Children 2006, Resurreccion and Khanh 2007, Hoang et al. 2011). Therefore the traditional division of labour is transformed by the departure of the woman because she is no longer present to undertake the food shopping, cooking, cleaning and childcare.

Two recent studies put the spotlight on left-behind-fathers in Southeast Asia. Lam and Yeoh (2015) explore fathering experiences of left-behind father-carers and find that the father assumed the primary role of carer of children. The fathers were assisted by relatives in some cases. In essence they were both mother and father to their children, which was emotionally and physically demanding for some of the fathers. Fathers were more likely to be the main carer for older children than smaller children. Mothers did not trust fathers to provide adequate care for young children. Meanwhile, fathers were entrusted with the role of caring for older children because they were able to discipline them as compared to elderly grandparents. Lam (2015) also reports similar findings in Vietnam where she found that stay-at-home fathers assumed care giving roles in the absence of their migrant wives. The transformation of traditional gender roles also extended to the husband undertaking other household duties such as cleaning, cooking, food shopping and assisting with school work. In effect, the man became both mother and father to the children. Evidence from the literature suggests that stay-at-home fathers were proud of undertaking these roles in the absence of their wives. However, in most cases, the father’s stressed the arrangement was temporary and mothers were expected to resume their duties as soon as they returned.

Therefore, the transformation of traditional gender roles was not permanent. Indeed, evidence suggests that mother’s resumed the roles of childcare, cooking and cleaning when they returned home on holiday because it was expected of them. Other case studies of returnee female migrants confirms the reversal of traditional

role alluded to by the fathers, in that the mothers resumed their traditional duties as soon as they returned home (Hugo 2002). In the studies cited above, left-at home fathers take pride in their ability to act both as mother and father to their children. However, executing these two roles together can be stressful and leads to a heavy workload, especially when some husbands try to balance childcare with their role as breadwinner in the household.

The breadwinner

The role of the husband and stay-at-home father as the breadwinner in the household is historically an important one which reaffirms the patriarchal status of married men (Elmhirst 2007). Studies in Southeast Asia show that husbands take great pride in being the “pillars of the home” and being able to provide for their family financially. In the context of the feminization of migration and the wider participation of women in the global economy, the foundations of breadwinning role of the husband/father are seemingly not as solid as they used to be.

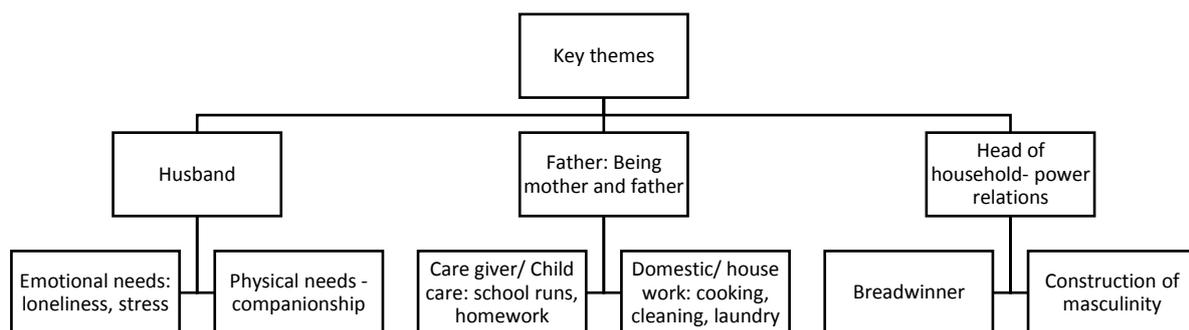
The migration decision is often made on economic terms. The husband and wife may decide that the wife migrates so she can earn money which will be remitted to fund their children’s education, purchase land, invest in a business or save for the future (United Nations Population Fund 2006). Studies show however that when women are in paid work, they earn more prestige which also raises their status (Elmhirst 2002). Thao (2015) demonstrates how the mother’s absence from the family home not only motivates rearrangement of family life but also results in the mother assuming the breadwinner role which is traditionally assigned to men in Vietnam. Discussions around the impact of female migration on left-behind husbands/fathers highlights the tensions that emerges when the women starts to earn, at times more income than her husband. The situation may potentially become even conflictual when the stay-at-home husband becomes dependent on the remittances sent by the migrant wife. Some authors have even discussed the emasculation of husbands’ vis-à-vis their earning capacity compared to their wives (Thao 2015).

Some husbands perceive the economic power of their migrant wives as a threat to their masculinity, which at times is complicated by them undertaking household duties which are traditionally considered to be the domain of the wife/mother. To reassert or uphold their identity as breadwinners in the family, some stay-at-home fathers try to balance the dual role of earner and carer for the children left behind. Delivering these two roles effectively can be quite burdensome/demanding and some studies have quoted left-at-home fathers complaining about workload, inadequate social life and high stress level (Hoang et al. 2011, Lam and Yeoh 2015, Thao 2015). The implications of trying to combine employment and childcare is that some stay-at-home husbands compromise their effort to be good fathers (Hoang et al. 2011). In other cases, the husband would intervene and deny the wife the

permission to migrate while other men reclaimed their power by purchasing large items or getting a loan without consulting their wives (Thao 2015).

Some key themes to emerge from the literature are shown in Figure 1. The analytical framework guided the issues that were examined during the fieldwork and will inform the presentation of the results in this paper. The literature has categorised the findings into the impact of female migration on the male as husband, father and breadwinner. In terms of the impact on husband, the emphasis is on the emotional impact in terms of loneliness and psychological/mental health. The impact on fathers focuses more on the physical impact of the absence of the mother which entails that the father undertakes household chores. Finally, the impact on the man’s role as breadwinner focuses on the power dynamics and construction of masculinity.

Figure 1: Overview of main themes and analytical framework



There are a number of gaps remain in the literature such as, does the effect of the separation differ depending on the period of time spent abroad by the woman, the duration of marriage, the age of the children left behind, and the level of support provided by the extended family to the husband? The distance of the migration may mitigate some of the emotional impact of migration. Does the impact on the husband differ depending on the distance that the woman travels (i.e. Indonesia to Malaysia compared to Indonesia to Saudi Arabia)?

The aim of the paper is to assess the relationship between married couples, the role of the left-behind father after the wife migrates and also to examine any changes in power structure following migration. We also discuss whether or not the mode of

communication makes a difference to helping husbands cope with the migration of their wives.

The following questions are addressed in this paper:

1. How does the entry of men and women into non-traditional roles affect men's lives as fathers, as well as women's lives as mothers?
2. How do fathers and mothers renegotiate gender norms in parenting in relation to the migration of mothers?
3. To what extent is the migration of wives in East Java, Indonesia leading to a change in the roles and status of women within the family and society more generally?

In this paper, we define international migration as any movement crossing an international border and lasting for 6 months or more. The definition of marriage is taken from the United Nations (2001, para. 56), which defines marriage as "an act, ceremony or process by which the legal relationship of husband and wife is constituted. The legality of the union may be established by civil, religious or other means as recognized by the laws of each country".

In the following sections of this paper, the introduction and review of the literature on is followed by an overview of the case study sites in East Java, Indonesia. The analysis examines the decision making process between husbands and wives in the pre-migration phase, the involvement of stay-at-home fathers in childcare and housework, and how they (re)construct their role as head of the household despite the economic contribution made by their wives through remittances. In the conclusion, we will discuss how stay-at-home fathers adapt to their role and interpret the implications of these findings for other contexts experiencing the feminization of migration.

British Council Institutional Links study 'The impact of female migration on the family' and methodology

This research utilized both quantitative and qualitative data from the British Council Institutional Links study, a mixed-method study investigating the impacts of female international migration on the left behind husband, children, elderly and household poverty. The paper only focuses on data from husbands with at least one child. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Faculty of Science Ethics Committee in August 2015. Fieldwork work was conducted from October to December 2015 by a research team based at the Brawijaya University, Indonesia.

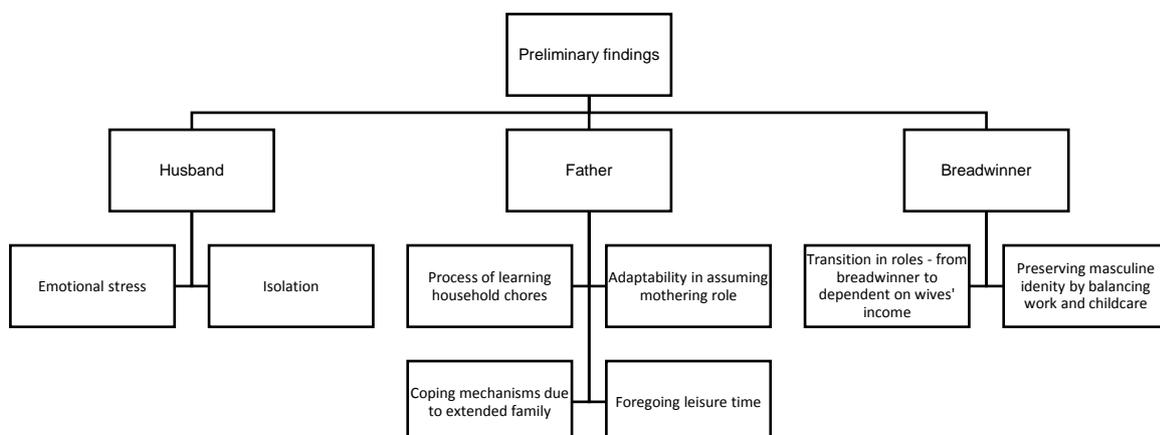
The sample for the study comprises transnational and non-migrant households in two villages in East Java.

The quantitative data are derived from household surveys conducted in 2015 in Indonesian (East Java) households that contained at least one female migrant, husband, elderly person and child. Indonesia was chosen for the study because it has one of the highest levels of international female migration in the world. In-depth interviews were conducted with left-behind husbands of migrant women exploring the following themes: negotiating migration decisions, coping strategies, child care, household chore/gender roles, mode and frequency of communication, economic conditions and finally impact of migration on relationship and marriage. Interviews were conducted in native languages and translated into English. After the fieldwork, the interviews were transcribed by the research team in Indonesia. Analysis of the data were undertaken by the research team at the University of Portsmouth.

Data and analysis

Interview transcripts from husband interviews, elderly interviews, children/youth interview and interviews with key informants will be analysed by grouping the main findings into themes and subthemes using QRS NVivo software. A total of eleven interviews with husbands of female migrants are analysed in this study. All data were anonymised. The main themes for this research from the interviews with husbands are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Preliminary findings from the fieldwork



Preliminary results

Eleven interviews were conducted with husbands in two villages in East Java. Most of the wives were working as care workers or maids in Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. This is surprising since the literature usually show that female migration from Indonesia is dominated by women going to the Middle East. In the interviews, some of the husbands noted that their wives had chosen other southeast Asian countries because of connections and better pay. Negative experiences in Saudi Arabia had also deterred some women from opting to migrate away from the Middle East. For example N. S. (Polorejo village, 58 years old) observed the following:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about previous migration she had before the current one [the wife of N. S. works in Taiwan]

Respondent: She had been to Saudi Arabia in the past. She said that being a migrant in Taiwan is better than in Saudi because in Saudi Arabia mostly the house which she manage to handle is big. Meanwhile in Taiwan, they only have a small house, unlike in Saudi.

The couples had children and this had been a motivating factor for migration. During the interviews, most of the husbands noted that their wives had migrated to fund the education of their children. Migration was due to economic factors such as poverty, funding education and construction a home as illustrated by this response.

Interviewer: Can you please tell me the reason why she [your wife] is working in Taiwan?

Respondent: The main reason is that our kids are in need for education fees. The more they grow older the more fees are needed for their education. And also, we were planning to construct a house.

Interviewer: Who decided that your wife shall work in any of the foreign countries?

Respondent: My wife had the initial eagerness to be a migrant worker. It was due to our poor economic circumstances. Because I could not fulfil basic necessities of our family. Then I agree to my wife's choice.

Interviewer: Beside you could not fulfil economic necessities of your family is there any other reason?

Respondent: No. The only reason is that we had to fulfil our children's needs' (P, Polorejo village, 41 years old).

Previous studies also show that women usually initiated the discussion for their migration, which was centred on an economic argument to persuade their husbands to give them permission to migrate. In this interview, the husband is open about their poor financial circumstances. However, poverty is not the only reasons for permitting his wife to migrant. The other reason for allowing his wife to migrate is due to his inability to fulfil his basic necessities as provide and breadwinner. By allowing his wife to migrate and work, he is essentially delegating the role of provider to her. Previous studies show that this decision making process is leading to a transformation of traditional gender roles in other developing countries.

Impact of female migration on the left-behind-father, father-carers, stay-at-home fathers

The husbands interviewed in this study became domesticated as a result of the migration of their wives. Husbands who previously had no experience of undertaking household duties have taken charge of household duties as illustrated in this interview:

Interviewer: Who is doing household activities since your wife migrated?

Respondent: Yes, it is me....I cook, I wash, I clean the house, and everything. It me who sent her [his daughter] to school and take care of her (S, Polprejo village, 46 years old).

In another interview, the response was as follows:

Interviewer: Are you doing any activity which previously you did not do when your wife was at home?

Respondent: Usually, when my wife was here, I go to the farm and my wife cook. Now, I cook for myself. And, I am able to cook my food now. Before that I cannot cook. I learn to cook after my wife go to be a migrant (S, 37 years, Polorejo village).

While most of the husbands were involved in household tasks, other sought help from female relative's such as their sisters, mothers of mothers in law as in this example.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about your daily activities?

Well in the morning, I have to get [my son] ready for school. Prepare his breakfast, take him to school. After that, I'm going to work with my father.... In the evening, I used to take [my son] to mosque to learn Arabic as well.

...

Interviewer: As your wife is working abroad, who is doing the cooking, cleaning, and laundry in the house?

Respondent: I do the cleaning and laundry by myself. But the one whose is doing the cooking is my mother who lives next to me (A. H. 31 years old, Kempung Baru village).

The responses show that husbands, with the help of female relatives in some cases have adapted to undertaking roles traditionally assigned to women especially in the rural areas of Indonesia. These interviews allude to the duality of being both mother and father to children left behind. Not all husbands have adapted to the transition and there are examples of marriages coming under strain from the evidence collected during the fieldwork.

Impact of female migration on the husband

The migration of a close family member have been found to result in emotional stress (Wilkerson et al. 2009). Husbands reported that they felt lonely following the departure of their wives. One husband reported that he was “depressed” when his wife left to work abroad (S, 46 years old, Polorejo village). Another husband noted that while he was lonely, having his daughter around allowed him to cope. Other participants used their work and generally keeping busy as a form of distraction from emphasising the loneliness they experienced after the departure of their partner.

An unexpected and rather frank response came from a participant who openly confessed to using the services of prostitutes to fulfil his sexual needs in the absence of his wife.

Interviewer: How have you responded to the absence of your wife from the home?

Respondent: I couldn't lie that sometimes I also allocate some money to buy some special services for myself. I used to call it “jajan” (shopping – refers to prostitution). Well, that is a normal need for a married adult I think.

...

Interviewer: How have other husbands whose wives have migrated to another country responded to the absence of their wives?

Respondent: Some of them are having affair with another woman, some of them are drinking, some of them are gambling (A. F., 27 years old, Kampung Baru village).

This respondent is in the minority in his openness to having an affair and discussig the problems that have arisen from the migration of wives in his village. Other respondents were mute on the issue and merely noted that they were not aware of how other husbands in the village had been affected by the absence of the wives.

There is reason to believe that the migration of wives has negative social consequences. One of the participants who reported feeling depressed after his wife left to work abroad has already divorced from his wife. Another participant in the process of divorce proceedings in the courts after his wife migrated for 11 years. The wife of Mr S. migrated in 2002, and had not to the village since then.

Interviewer: Do you have more responsibilities since your wife migrated? Or do you have more time to go out?

Respondent: Yes, but now I am free from any responsibilities since we divorced. I was depressed, but since we divorced, I am feeling okay.

....

Interviewer: Can you tell me about how you divorced from your wife?

Respondent: It was a very difficult moment. I always feel that I should marry again. Now I already divorced with her [his wife] since 2013. At that tomes, she was in Saudi Arabia, and I went to the magistrate court to apply for divorce. But my wife is not involved in the process. I only get one letter from Saudi Arabia and I take it to the Magistrate office.

Interviewer: Who is asking for divorce?

Respondent: I make the petition to her to divorce me (S, Polorejo village, 46 years).

The respondent confirms that his case is not an isolation by stating that:

'We have a lot of story here in this village. I have one neighbour... She is divorced from her husband. ... It's depressing, very sad. It is bad to tell that kind of story. You will find a lot of story in the Administrative Office of this village, in which husbands divorced his wife due to a migration to another country. Mostly, it's the husband who sent petition for divorce, and mostly the wife do not give any permission for their marriage status' (S, Polorejo village, 46 years).

Discussion

The preliminary findings highlight the varied social impact of labour migration of wives in two villages in East Java. We have identified that relations are coming under strain due to the prolonged absence of wives away from their husbands. Husbands noted that their wives had migrated for economic reasons, namely to fund the education of their children or to save to construct a home. However, few were able to discuss the negative social consequences of migration. The few who did highlighted the difficulty of balancing being a mother and father to their children.

Anecdotal evidence of extramarital affairs and divorce also emerged from the interviews. It may be that some the participants did not discuss these issues because they are socially taboo or they are difficult subjects to openly discuss to researchers. This is especially the case when most of the husbands reported feeling lonely or depressed after their wives migrated. The next phase of the research will analyse the qualitative data in NVivo using thematic analysis. The responses will be compared across the two villages to understand the complexity of the social impact of female migration on marriage, domestic tasks and coping strategies. The findings will be compared to previous studies cited in the literature.

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Funding

This project was funded by the British Council Newton Institutional Links grant (British Council 172600309).

Acknowledgements

The project was undertaken jointly with the University of Brawijaya, Malang District, East Java.