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SOCIO-ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS: A CASE-STUDY OF PATHANAMTHITTA DISTRICT OF KERALA

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Abstract

Migration has emerged to be a socio-economic phenomenon in Pathanamthitta district, where a significant share of households depends on internal and international mobility for income, education, and improved living standards. Migration largely contributes to upward economic mobility, but at the same time it also generates financial and emotional strain causing psychological challenges for families left behind. This study examines the socio-demographic characteristics of migrant households, their socio-economic vulnerability, and mental well-being levels through the WHO-5 scale. Primary data were collected from 120 migrant households across selected taluks using a structured questionnaire for the study. The study highlights that higher socio-economic vulnerability reduces psychological well-being, underscoring the need for integrated policies addressing financial stability, mental health support, and social protection. There is a need to strengthen community-level counselling services, enhanced financial literacy, and social welfare coverage to safeguard the well-being of migrant households in Pathanamthitta.

Keywords: Migration, Socio-economic vulnerability, Psychological well-being, Migrant households, WHO-5 Well-Being Index

INTRODUCTION

Migration plays an important role in the socio-economic status of households in Kerala. It throws a setback on households' development paths and their means of subsistence. Migration is seen as an important livelihood mechanism, sustaining the families through increase in income, higher per capita, high quality of life, better educational opportunities, and enhanced social mobility. Along with these benefits, it also brings about challenges creating vulnerability in the households. Mental well-being, is an increasingly relevant study area in research related to migration, which is largely influenced by this susceptibility. Irregular income, unstable employment at the destination, debt accumulated in the migration process, extended family separation, lack of social support networks, and uncertainty about job security are some factors resulting in these challenges. Family members often face psychological distress even though migration brings it with increased monetary gains.

Pathanamthitta district, in South Kerala shows a high reliance on both internal and international migration. There exists a continuous outflow of people to destinations like the Gulf countries, other Indian states, and countries outside the national boundary. However, loneliness, high rate of emotional stress, anxiety in different forms affect both the left behind family members and the migrants that negatively affects the well-being of the household including the children, spouse and parents. The Economic Review by the State Planning Board states that, between the years 2008 and 2014, the number of people leaving the state has increased in Pathanamthitta and there is a sign of rising international migration in the district. According to the Kerala Department of Economics & Statistics (Eco stat), "the migration rate" was nearly 40% (rural areas) when compared to other districts. A leading newspaper also reports that "schools in the district are facing a shift in the demographics because many young people from the district are migrating abroad (to EU, UK, US, Australia, Canada).

Even though the extent of migration in Pathanamthitta is high, empirical research linking socio-economic vulnerability with mental health outcomes at the household level remains scarce. This study is an attempt to understand how socioeconomic vulnerabilities affect the mental health of migrant households in the district. A well-defined structured questionnaire is used for the purpose, to study the relationship between economic insecurity and psychological health, contributing valuable insights for policymakers and local governance bodies.

Statement of the Problem

Households where migrated population exists, often encounters insecurity in employment, fluctuating income, financial indebtedness and future uncertainties. This results in facing emotional and psychological challenges that can affect both the migrants and family members at home. Lack of adequate communication, continue separation, pressure at work place and provisions to meet the financial expectations could be the contributing factors. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policy interventions in Pathanamthitta, where a sizable percentage of households have at least one migrant member. Also, fewer empirical studies have examined how these socioeconomic vulnerabilities affect the mental health outcomes for migrant households, in-spite of the district's high migration rate. The majority of research concentrate on remittances, monetary gains, and outcomes in labour market. But less attention paid to the psychological and emotional effects faced by the families after migration. The paper is developed to provide evidence-based policy interventions that support migrants and the members psychological and economic resilience.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the socio-economic characteristics of migrant households in Pathanamthitta district.
2. To examine the major socio-economic vulnerability faced by migrant households.
3. To evaluate the mental well-being levels of migrant households.
4. To analyse the relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and mental well-being.

METHODOLOGY

The data for the study is collected from a sample size of 120 respondents using multi-stage stratified sampling method in the initial stage. Primary data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire. To identify the migrant households in Pathanamthitta district, three taluks where migration is relatively high has been selected namely Thiruvalla, Ranni and Kozhencherry. Within these taluks, two Panchayats were purposefully selected where sufficient migrant household exists and final households were identified using random sampling. The income category is given according to the income scale used by Keral State Planning Board. The land possessed in measures in cent.

Table 1 Socio-economic profile of the respondents

S. N	Variable	Category	Total number	Percentage (%)
1	No of members in the household	1-3	34	28
		4-6	68	57
		>6	18	15
2	Type of household	Nuclear	87	72.5
		Joint	33	27.5
3	Employment of household head	Salaried	41	34.2
		Self-employed	32	26.7
		Agriculture	19	15.8
		Others	18	15
		Not working	10	8.3
4	Annual household income	Lower income	30	25
		Lower middle income	42	35
		Upper middle income	32	26.7
		High income	16	13.3
5	Religion	Hindu	43	35.8
		Christian	57	47.5
		Muslim	20	16.7
6	Gender of the migrant	Male	75	62.5
		Female	45	37.5
7	Who migrated from the household	Household head	38	31.6
		Son/Daughter	46	38.3
		Spouse	25	20.8
		Others	11	9.3
8	Education level of migrant	SSLC	15	12.5
		Higher Secondary	33	27.5
		Graduate	48	40
		Post Graduate and above	24	20

9	Type of Migration	Internal	56	46.7
		International	64	53.3
10	Purpose of Migration	Employment	53	44
		Education	35	29.3
		Marriage	20	16.7
		Others	12	10
11	Duration of Migration	< 1 year	20	16.7
		2-5 years	42	35
		>5 years	58	48.3

Source: Primary data

The above table presents the socio-economic profile of the migrants and their family. It is observed that 72.5% of the households are nuclear, and majority of the households have 4-6 members. With respect to the employment status of the head of the household, 34% are salaried, 26% are self -employed, while 19% and 18% are engaged in agriculture and other business respectively. Additionally, 8.3% were not engaged in any form of employment. The annual household income of the migrants shows that 35% belong to lower-middle income category, 26.7% belong to upper-middle income category. Lower-income and high-income groups each accounted for 13%. Among the respondents, 47.5% of the respondents were Christians followed by 35.8% Hindu religion. In terms of gender, 62.5 % were male and the rest 45 % were female.

Further, it was found that 38.3% of the migrants were sons or daughter in the family who has migrated, followed by household head 31.6%. Spouse and others were 20.8% and 9.3% respectively. The highest education levels of the migrated individuals shows that 48% were graduates, 33% has completed higher secondary education and 24% were post-graduates or above. International migration was found to be the highest which was 53.3% and the rest internal migration as 46.7%. Among the reasons for migration, 44% migrated for employment purpose, 35% for education and 20% after marriage. Majority of the migrated respondents' status revealed that it has been more than 5 years since they have moved which was 48.3% and between 2-5 years by 35%. Another 16.7 % of the migrants has moved in less than a year.

Table 2 Socio-economic vulnerability indicators

S.N	Variable	Category	Total number	Percentage
1	Annual Household income	Poor < 1.2lakh	8	6.6
		Lower Middle (1.2 3lakh)	15	12.6
		Middle (3-6 lakh)	30	25
		Upper Middle (6-10lakh)	42	35
		High Income (>10 lakh)	25	20.8
2	Employment status of non-migrants	Employed	56	46.6
		Unemployed	42	35
		Not in the labour force	22	18.4
3	Housing type	Katcha	14	11.7
		Semi-Pucca	48	40
		Pucca	58	48.3
4	Land Ownership	No Land	12	10
		<10 Cent	19	15.8
		10-40 Cent	36	30
		40-80	33	27.6
		>80 Cent	20	16.6
5	Access to Social security	Yes	57	47.5
		No	63	52.5
6	Savings behavior	Regular	38	31.6
		Irregular	59	49.2
		Nil	23	19.2
7	Debt	No debt	25	20.8
		Moderate (<2 Lakhs)	57	47.5
		High Debt (>2 Lakhs)	38	31.7
8	Frequency of remittance	Monthly	52	43.3

| | | Quarterly | 43 | 35.7 |
| | | Occasionally | 25 | 21 |

Source: Primary data

The above table shows the socio-economic vulnerability of the households based on six key dimensions: household income, employment status of the migrant, regularity of remittances, debt burden, housing type and savings ratio. In the study, 35% of the respondents belong to the upper middle-income group, 25% fall under middle-income category, and 28.8% are in the high-income group. Lower middle-income and poor-income households account for 12.6% and 6.6% respectively. Regarding employment of the people in the family, 46.5% of the migrant households are found to be employed while nearly 53% are either unemployed or not part of the labour force. Housing conditions appear relatively stable, with the majority residing in semi-pucca or pucca houses. About 10% reported having no land,15.8% owned less than 10 cents, 30% possessed 10-40 cents, 27.6% owned 40-80 cents, and 16% had more than 80 cents of land. About 47.5 % reported having some form of social security coverage. 49% had irregular savings, 31.6% reported regular savings and 19.2% had no savings at all. Debt burden also varied with 47.5% reporting moderate debt, 31.7% reporting high debt and 20.8% having no debt. The frequency of remittance shows that 35.7% send money quarterly, 43.3% send it monthly, while 21% remit only occasionally.

Table 3 Mental Well-being of the household

Status	Score Range	Total Respondents	Percentage
Low well-being	0-50	48	40
Moderate well-being	51-75	54	45
High well-being	76-100	18	15
Total		120	100

Source: Primary data

The above table shows the mental well-being of migrant households measured through the WHO-5 scale. Well-Being Index is a measure used to find out the emotional and psychological well-being in social science research. It is a widely used tool for measuring the emotional well-being. Initially scores obtained were computed on a scale of 0–100 and then categorized as following: low (0–50), moderate (51–75), and high (76–100) well-being. The result shows that 40% of the respondents experience low mental well-being, indicating mental stress, while 45% report moderate well-being. Only 15% of the migrant households fall under the high well-being category. These results highlight the need for early psychological support and socio-economic strengthening of migrant families.

Table 4 Relationship between Socio-economic Vulnerability and Mental well-being

Category (SEVI)	Low well-being	Moderate Well-being	High Well-being	Total
Low Vulnerability	8(20%)	18(45%)	14(5%)	40
Moderate Vulnerability	20(36%)	28(50%)	8(14%)	56
High Vulnerability	20(66.7%)	8(26.7%)	2(6.6%)	30
Total	48	54	18	120

χ^2 : 18.64   df : 4   p-value: 0.0010

Chi-Square Test of Association Between Socio-Economic Vulnerability and Mental Well-Being
A chi-square test was conducted to find out whether socio-economic vulnerability (SEV) is significantly associated with the mental well-being levels of migrant households.

Hypothesis:
H_0: There exists no relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and mental well-being.
H_1: There exists relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and mental well-being.
Since p value less than 0.0010 we reject the null hypothesis. The chi-square test shows that there is statistically significant relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and mental well-being levels of the households.

Findings
• The socio-demographic characteristics shows that majority of the households are medium size families (57%). Smaller households account for 28% while large households form only 15%. Migration decisions are found to be made within moderately sixed families.

• It is found that majority of the families form nuclear household type (72.5%) among the migrant households and only less percentage form joint family type.

• There exists a diverse occupational structure with a significant proportion depending on stable income source among the household. We find that 34% of head of the household are salaried, 26% are self -employed, while 19% are engaged in agriculture and 18% are engaged in other business respectively

• A sizeable share of households belongs to the lower middle-income category (35%). followed by 26.7% upper-middle income and 25% lower income. Migration is more common among middle income families.

• Migration across religion shows that Christian community forms the majority (47.5%) followed by Hindu 35.8%.

• The majority of migrants are male (62.5%), while females constitute 37.5%. The sons and daughters of household form the largest share (38.3%) which indicates a significant rise in student and youth migration, particularly for education and early-career opportunities.

• Majority of the migrated population are graduates which could be driven strongly by educated youths pursuing employment or higher studies.

• International migration (53.3%) slightly exceeds internal migration (46.7%) showing the district role as an important contributor to Kerala economy's labor and education migration overseas.

• Majority have moved for employment (44%), and 29.3% for education. Most migrants have been away for more than 5 years (48.3%), indicating long-term or semi-permanent migration patterns. We find that migration is largely stable and continuous among these households.

• The annual income distribution shows that a larger share belongs to middle-income (25%) and upper-middle-income households (35%) indicating that most migrant households enjoy relatively stable or above-average income levels, possibly due to remittances contributing to household earnings.

• Thers is a considerable increase in dependent population which might put pressure on the migrant remittances but the housing type indicates good living conditions. Also, majority households (88.3%) combined have at least some land assets, indicating moderate asset security, though a minority remains vulnerable due to landlessness.

• There has been limited access to formal social protection (47.5%) which increases vulnerability, making households more dependent on migrant income for their welfare.

• Savings behavior is also fond irregular for majority of the households (49.2%) and 19.2% have no savings at all.

• High indebtedness among nearly one-third of the households is found. This can be a sign of financial stress and increased vulnerability despite remittance inflows.

• A regular monthly remittance is observed which highlights strong financial dependency of households on migrant income (43.3%)

• The mental well-being index showed that 40% of the households exhibit low mental well-being and 45% fall in moderate well-being.

• It is found that socio-economic vulnerability increases, the proportion of households with low mental well-being rises sharply, while high well-being declines consistently. This confirms a strong negative association between socio-economic vulnerability and mental well-being. The results clearly demonstrate that as socio-economic vulnerability increases, the share of households experiencing low mental well-being rises significantly, while the proportion reporting high well-being declines steadily.

• The chi-square test also revealed that a statistically significant association exists between socio-economic vulnerability and the mental well-being status of the households.

Suggestions and Policy Frameworks

• It is necessary to strengthen social protection measures to the migrant families and expand livelihood support especially to the dependent population.

• Financial literacy programmes can be established to enhance financial discipline.

• Easier access to mental health services should be promoted especially to families with high vulnerability scores. Support networks could be established to help the families in need.

• Counselling centres could be established in areas where migration is high and subsidized mental health checkups could be provided.

• Skill development programmes should be encouraged to prevent massive outflow of youth to outside the state and retain the youth.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that migration in Pathanamthitta is influenced at large by economic aspirations and educational opportunities, where a major share of migrants is from nuclear, middle-income, and Christian households. Young and

well-educated males form the considerable migrant population and a larger proportion is engaged in international migration, indicating long-term strategies adopted by families to enhance income, education, and overall living standards. Although migration has a positive impact on household economic mobility, the presence of irregular savings, high debt levels, and limited access to social security reflects continuing financial vulnerability. Mental well-being levels remain a concern, with only 15% of households reporting high well-being. There is a need for early psychological support and targeted socio-economic strengthening measures for migrant families. Many households continue to experience financial insecurity in spite of migration which reveals that migration does not automatically eliminate economic vulnerability. Migration is seen to place a higher psychological cost among families even though it brings monetary benefits.

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