

Ethical Dilemma in Navigating Everyday Life of ‘Left Behind Women’ in Kosi Region of North Bihar ¹

Kosi region of North Bihar has historically been the center of migration. The embeddedness of flood and waterlogging in the geography of North Bihar and its interaction with the social, economic, political and cultural landscapes have been pushing people to migrate. The contours of migration have undergone waves of change with the changing political economy at the local and global levels. Despite these variations, it has been observed in numerous studies that migration is predominantly embarked by men, leaving their families in the village. This results in the fragmentation of the household and has implications on the left behind family and especially for the migrant’s wives who, in a patriarchal society, derive their social position through their husbands. Spatial bias in migration research has led to an overemphasis of research on migrants, while the non-economic aspect of migrant households and the immobility of non-migrant or left behind members is an under-explored domain.

The paper is an attempt to engage with the everyday life of left-behind women within the phenomena of migration. There are two central questions that the paper would attempt to answer- Firstly, how is migration a transforming experience for the left behind women, where there is an increased burden of work on women’s shoulders; and if transgression of roles and responsibilities in the household gives them the space for autonomy and decision-making power. Living in a flood-affected region makes these women’s life more complex since they are the agents to ensure the protection of the family and yet in need of protection. The second part of the paper with engages with the ethical dilemma of both researcher and the participants. How did the research participants deal with their anxiety and confusion around the norms and values of patriarchal society during the long absence of men and the process of research? It will be placed in dialogue with the researcher’s ethical dilemma of placing self in the field. In conclusion, the paper will try to pull together key arguments around the everyday life and dilemmas of left behind women and how a researcher can approach the field ethically when dealing with vulnerable groups.

¹ Tentative title

Section I: Everyday life of ‘Left Behind Women’ in the Kosi Region

The use term ‘Left Behind Women’ for the non-migrant wives of migrant men has come under the critical radar of many scholars. It is because of its dismissive attitude that sees women as passive bystanders to the household’s decision to migrate. Hence a need to understand the women’s perception of migration and their role in the migration process (Pedraza, 1991). In the paper, I am problematizing passivity associated with ‘Left Behind Women’, but will continue the use of the term to emphasize the embedded contradictions in the understanding of the immobility of women in migration studies. Big data have failed to capture these nuances while maneuvering the narratives from everyday life has helped in capturing the intersubjective world and multiple realities of the ‘left behind women’.

It is a qualitative study with interpretivism as the research paradigm to capture the everyday life of ‘left behind women’ in the flood-affected Kosi region of Bihar. Interpretivism has helped in exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to their life events. This form of inquiry ‘supports a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation’ (Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews of 12 ‘left behind women’ and observations were used as a method to collect data to capture relevant information from the participants. Semi-structured interview guide and field diary were the key tools for data collection. Throughout the process of data collection, the effort was to keep the setting as informal as possible so that participants are at ease and there is no hesitancy to share their personal life. Quietly listening to the conversation of a group of women helped to get insights into their world views, daily living, and struggles. Both methods complement each other, which ultimately helped get deep insights into the field.

A household² is not the unified entity it is assumed to be. It is a site of power dynamics based on customs and norms around gender, age and authority. The concept of ‘head of the household’ is the institutionalization of this authority, where some members exercise more

² Family is the basic unit of society. It is series of relationship between individuals who are bound by an ideology of shared kinship (Stack, 1974). Family is not based on ecological or geographical locations rather on the structure of relationship and flow of activities Household is defined by co-residence or spatial proximity and has the possibility of extending it across long distance and multiple locations for undetermined period of time, as in case of a migrant household (Fox and Luxton, 2001; Herrera-Lima, 2001).

power than others. In a patriarchal society family as a basic social unit gets legitimacy through a heterosexual marriage with men as head of the household with the ultimate decision-making powers, while women's position is considered secondary are assigned mothering, nurturing and caretaking roles. At the very core of these gender norms is the sexual division of labor within the household, which establishes men as the breadwinner and portrays them as protectors of the dependent women, children and elderly of the household. The protector narrative establishes the discourse that man has the physical power to make sacrifices and provide security to the family. Embedded within the role of a protector is the need for power and control over the subordinates (Woznicka, 2021), justifying the control over women's productive and reproductive labor, sexuality and mobility. As caregivers, women are expected to take charge of responsibilities that are essential for the everyday production of goods and services for domestic consumption. For women, it is a form of unpaid and invisibilized physical, psychological and emotional labor which comes either at the cost of or as an addition to the economic burden.

In practice, there is fluidity in the way these gender binaries operate in the everyday lives of people. There are many instances of deviation from these roles and responsibilities, and migration creates scope for these deviations. Hondagneu Sotelo (2000) states that migration is both a gendered and a gendering process. In the migration process, the family undergoes many changes as the individual members and household level as they try to meet their needs in different contexts. It redefines and challenges the established norms and division of labour and gives them meaning. It also leads to displacement and dislocation of material and discursive arrangement of members as they find themselves in different economic, social, political and cultural contexts (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991). This results in stages of negotiations, sources of possible insecurity, conflict and tension and some changes in power and autonomy for different family members (Boyd, 1996; Hirsch, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Wong, 2003). It also ruptures and transforms the family's caregiving strategies, resource circulation, gender and generational role definition and division of labour and overall ideologies and normative framework.

Scholarly work around 'left behind women' have been extensively identified through both qualitative and quantitative analysis the key circumstances that shape the work burden (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1990), autonomy (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1990), and decision-making power

of 'left behind women and its impact on patriarchal norms of society (Chant, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). To name a few, living arrangements in the household (Desai and Banerji, 2008), economic conditions (Rahat, 1986) and support system (Garrner, 1985; Gulathi, 1993) are some of the major factors determining their everyday life. But in the case of Kosi region there is an added factor of living in an ecologically sensitive region of annual flooding that brings along with it many constrain, further adding to the complexities in their life.

In the Kosi region life revolves around the flood, for a larger part of the year, they are either in the pre-flood, flood and post-flood situations, which spans over two to six months depending upon the water level in the village. Each of them comes with its own set of constraints, and women have to deal with it either single-handedly or with support from others members of the extended kinship group. Floods are a key determiner of most of their decision, whether it is the timing of migration, marriage, childbirth, house location, structure of the house, etc. Women start planning for floods months in advance, ensuring food security, and the availability of firewood is a major area of concern for them. Though these tasks are predominantly perceived as women's responsibility but also demand handholding support from men at different stages of procurement, processing and storage. In the absence of their husband, women undertake each of the work on their own, demanding frequent visits to the market as well as planning for its storage. As much as it gives them autonomy for mobility, it also adds to the basket of work that they have to undertake.

Once the monsoon arrives, there will be limited access to dry firewood, and those who have cattle will not be able to dry cow dung cakes known as *goitha* (women prepare twice in a month), keeping this in mind collection of both the items is done by women before the arrival of monsoon and is stored inside the house. Since there is unpredictability in the intensity of flood and for how long they will be able to store before the water enters the house, women also arrange for food which does not necessarily require cooking yet fulfils the energy requirement of the body. Food items like *chiwda* (flattened rice), different kinds of *saatu* (roasted and grinded lentils) and *mudhi* (puffed rice) are stored for days since the mobility gets restricted from days to months.

Another important arrangement that has to be made the pre-flood area of work is the maintenance of the house to sustain monsoon, along with the wrath of flood. Though before migrating the men of the house ensure that the house is in good shape and there is no leakage on the roof. In fact, a large part of the income goes in the repair of the house, since this work has to be ensured twice- once before monsoon so that the house can sustain monsoon and secondly after the flood to check the damage that the flood has brought along. As mentioned before, most houses are *kutchha* where bamboo sticks are tied together to frame the structure on which hay is weaved into, this gives the shape of a typical hut. Since people get relocated frequently, there is a practice of carrying along the roof and walls of the house. But when there is a larger investment has to be made for the renovation of the house, then the presence of men is preferred. Some part of the remittance goes into making a raised platform for the house so that the house could sustain some rise in the water level. This exercise has to be repeated every 2-3 years. Because of the flood situation and frequent displacement, people abstain from building *Pucca* houses. There are very few *Pucca* houses that have either been built on the embankment or have just made a store room and a toilet on the raised platform.

During floods, drinking water and sanitation are two major challenges that women face. As for drinking water facilities, the government has installed water taps at various locations but very few have regular water supply hence are not reliable sources. Women mostly depend on hand pumps, which often gets submerged when the water level rises, polluting water sources. Due to a lack of alternatives, they use water from hand pumps or they collect rainwater or in extreme situation, there are times when they are forced to consume direct flood water. Women lack awareness about methods of water purification, mostly, they drink water filtered out of cotton cloth or in times when water contamination is high in the form of foul smell, then they restore to boiling water. Boiling of water is also a challenge because there is limited access to fuel for the stove; hence water intake becomes very limited. The cases of stomach infection increases manifold during flood and post flood situation, especially amongst children.

While flood sanitation is another area of concern, open defecation is commonly practiced amongst people, one cannot think of putting money for toilet construction when gripped by fear of displacement. The situation gets worse during floods, especially for women who have to travel long distances in water in search of raised areas or have to relieve themselves on the boat. This

makes water a breeding ground for all kinds of diseases. Since this same water is used for various domestic purposes, issues of diarrhoea, typhoid and other water-borne and vector-borne disease, UTI is very common. cases of snake bites and skin infections also increase. In case of any health emergency, it becomes very difficult to even get first aid. Taking care of the old and sick during floods further adds on to women's work and responsibility. Ladduwati Devi talking about her experience of flood says,

Once the water reaches our courtyard, most of us do not sleep, we light the *diya* and stay up all night long. In the dark, anything can crawl up and get inside, we have to be watchful. Everyone here, even the small creatures, are fighting for survival.

Apart from all this, women have to take care of children, they are also responsible for all kinds of household work which includes safeguarding properties and animals from being stolen or lost. Therefore during the flood women live under intense emotional and physical stress.

In Darbhanga the increase in water level is not very high and the water recedes within five-six days, people prefer to stay at their house on raised platforms. But Kadli Patti Panchayat of Saharsa becomes a small island, water stagnation remains longer, ranging from fifteen to twenty days. In the Kosi region it is very common to find houses constructed on raised platforms, rising water could be avoided as much as possible. Most of the families purchase wooden cot. These cots act as platforms at the time of flood. Often days are spent on it where all the major activities, including cooking, eating and sleeping are carried out. But there are times when water level increases so much that they are forced to vacate the village and move to roads, highways and embankments or if there is a government rescue and relief center.

Moving out of the village is the last resort for women, since in the absence of their husband they feel unsafe and prefer to stay in their own village. Parveen Khatun explained,

Things are in control if we stay in a familiar region. If we have to move to another location without any male member of the household it becomes very difficult. Though we are familiar with other people of the village, but then you never know about others intentions.

To live in an open space the privacy of women also gets compromised. Privacy is defined differently not only amongst individuals but also amongst different communities and societies. An urban upper middle class living in gated communities and lower middle class living in slums have very different understanding of privacy, while in rural areas it takes a completely different form. Women in Kosi do not hold on to privacy as very dearly, their days are spent eating, sleeping, talking in each other's courtyard, most of the houses have open bathing areas, partially covered with old *saari* or any other piece of cloth. Yet at the same time one would find women in *ghunghat* in front of elders and other men of the village. So *ghunghat* gives them a sense of privacy, rather than having a separate room for themselves or for that matter a separate bathing area. In such a social structure when during floods, they have to move temporarily to embankment, highways or any other high rise area, they find it difficult to maintain the norm of interaction, when everything becomes so public. In one location people from many villages settled during the flood. They remain worried about their safety and security. There are cases of violence and mis-conduct by other men is common. Once they evacuate from their village they are concerned about their safety and there is fear of being abused by strangers.

While in some arrangements pre-flood men contributed their bit by maintaining the house. Post-flood repair work of the house is often carried out under the supervision of women. In case of lack of money, women try to make it a little functional and leave the maintenance for later when their husband's would arrive. Households that have got *pucca* houses constructed also face leakage and damping issues. But the repair work of a *pucca* house is expensive and often requires skilled or semi-skilled labor. This gets delayed very often until there is some function or wedding in the house.

Once the flood water recedes, a new set of challenges have to be overcome. The stagnation that the flood had brought about in the lives of people rejuvenates into action. Firstly the affected household would start their recoveries on the damage to house, reallocating things back to their original place, clearing the cattle shed, checking water-logging in their agricultural field, etc. Many women have to balance out their work between these jobs at home and the need to start looking for daily wage work in the village. The household and agricultural fieldwork is directly proportional to the intensity of the flood that touched upon the village. While talking about the post-flood situation, Uma Devi says,

Post-flood we have so much work to do. There is so much work here and there. If there is a lot of water in the field it has to be removed through a pump or else *jal kumbhi* (water hyacinth) would grow and will not only take away nutrients from the soil.

At a time when there are works at multiple levels, women are overburdened since there is an absence of male members who could have taken care of some of the work. This is also the time when many of households get into debt since they do not have enough money to buy food or cater of health emergencies and the cost of dislocation. Most of these contingencies are handled by women along with the support of extended family and sometimes their husbands. This situation has pushed women to go out of their way to row boats and relocate on short notice, taking care of all health emergencies.

The NRLM-led SHG movement via Jeevika has made inroads in large part of North Bihar, this has led to further institutionalization of women's role in accessing government programs and policies. This has also been referred s a consumption-driven credit scheme which further facilitates migration. The state has been forced to 'democratize' its patronage and spread its cover widely to incorporate allies belonging to the erstwhile neglected sections of society. (Kumar, 2012). Because of the presence of Jeevika in the region, women's mobility has increased since they have to go for weekly meetings or have to visit banks when their turn comes. By visiting banks, they also get exposed to public office, and the initial fear and apprehension about it fade away. It also provides a platform to take loans, which is under the grip of women. For financial requirements, now money gets mobilized through women. This means she is now better informed about the expenditure of the house and the income sources of her husband.

Section II: Spaces of Ethical Dialogue between Researcher and Participant

Researching with a vulnerable population who are precariously positioned at the edge of social, political and economic margins, comes with the ethical responsibility of- doing no harm, respecting autonomy and ensuring equitable sharing of benefits (Flick, 2018). Ethical considerations are multilayered, situational, pluralist (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Mauthner et al., 2002; Reid et al., 2018) and are diffused across different stages of the research.

In this section, I will engage with the ethical dilemma of both researcher and the participants and how it was negotiated during the process of data collection. It will also emphasize how in the process of research, equalizing power relations, mutual sharing of information, openness about the purpose of the research, self-disclosures, and respecting diversity and the work schedule and time constraints of the participants were ensured. During the research, I, as a researcher, also questioned my own traits, intentions and how I related with participants, which helped in trust building, removing biases and prejudice and developing deep connections with people.

For an average individual to express their perception about themselves is quite difficult. Now considering a rural setting when an unlettered woman- whose opinion has never been a concern for anyone, is asked to talk about herself, it left many of them confused. While I pushed my question again, wanting them to say something, many of them repeated their name, residential and family details. When I intrigued them further a few talked about their agriculture work, cattle rearing and other ways in which they were part of productive activities. While some got irritated and said I did nothing, I just stayed at home. In their candid replies, these women said what society and many in academics have been trying to portray about their ‘passivity’. As a result of this conditioning, they do not see their existence independently but as merely a member of family and community. The invisibilization of women we keep hearing at different platforms has been internalized by these women so much that they have failed to see their own worth. During the interview process or informal interaction, my effort was also to help these women to self-actualize their roles and responsibility in the family. For this, I identified major events that are integral to any woman's life; through getting a glimpse of their experience of these events, their perceptions about it also started to surface. This was done with an understanding that the psychological and cognitive realities of migration, frequent displacement and other vulnerabilities may have diverse life experiences ranging from wholesome and friendly experiences to more misfortunate ones. Hence there is a need to give attention to the “ethics of representation” because these experiences are mediated through the interpretive authority that the researcher exercises. There is always an apprehension representation of partial trust and of how it will be understood by different audiences (Pickering and Kara, 2017).

Rapport building is a very crucial element of the research journey; it ensures better operationalization of the planned methodology. The vitality of rapport building increases when

the study is 'researching down' i.e. power dynamics between the researcher and participants is inclined towards the researcher who has the potentiality of causing harm to participants.

In the case of the study on the everyday life of left-behind women, rapport building was the foremost step to comprehending into the actors' construction of their world through subjective meaning and motivations. Their initial introduction in the village was of great importance as people's perception got shaped by who is introducing me. In Darbhanga I was introduced through a PDS dealer who belonged to the Yadav community. When I was visiting household in Dalit community I was looked at with suspicion. It took me a few days to gain their trust and to make them believe that I am harmless to them. First step was to explain the purpose of the study. I explained to them that writing about the village is part of my college evaluation to become a teacher. Second step was my interaction with children. I would engage with them, ask about their friends, games they play, click pictures, show them videos, get colors and chocolates for them. Young girls were especially interested; I would tell them a rough idea of whom I would want to interact with. They helped me get in touch with the participants. Whenever I travelled there was a group of children around me. The concept of one-to-one conversation did not exist in the Kosi region. People kept joining and leaving in between the conversations. In fact they were unaware of the concept of private space, most of their time was spent in the common area either of their own house or neighbors courtyard. Children loved to take dips in the river at least twice in a day. In Darbhanga women also took dips in the river especially in the summer, but in Saharsa women avoided taking dip in the river. So many times I was offered to join them for swimming, but out of my fear for water, I would politely refuse. But I did join them by sitting at the bank and watching them play in the river. It was only in summers when water level was low that one got into water in a limited stretch and the current in the river is also low. But most of the children are trained swimmers since they have grown up seeing the water level rise and fall. In Darbhanga the stream of Kosi is not very crowded and not too many outsiders can be seen in certain stretches near the village, hence easier for women to go to water. But in Saharsa it is a major trading site where one would find continuous movement of people and goods. Hence as much they would have wanted but could not go swimming in the river.

A major area of interest of the women was marriage. They were intrigued if I am married and when I will get married. During the first few conversations one of the old woman jokingly

said “ah! You are not married. How are we supposed to joke around with you?” Most of their jokes had a sexual undertone attached to it. For my enquiry into everyday life and spaces I wanted to go a step ahead to have conversation about their intimate life, relationship with husband and longingness in times of their absence. It was difficult to have these conversations as a part of the interview, since the interview has always been a public affair. I tried to get into informal conversations with women. In the process I realized that to gain trust is about sharing emotions, unless I share about my personal life, how can I expect them to talk about it. There were also times when I would make up stories just to get women’s perspective, but most often I shared my own personal experience and they would eventually share their views on it. The informal conversations very often included about how they got married, how is the relationship with their husband shaped and how they are coping with absence of their husbands. In the process of asking these questions I would tell them about myself that I am about to get married, would show the picture of my fiancé and would share my fear and anticipation about the marriage. In the process I was also give many advices of how I should spend my married life. Even now I am in touch with many of the participants. I would get calls from them often. But telephonic conversations have so far remained very limited.

While on field I carried with myself with the baggage of identities along, which was constantly re-defined and re-negotiated based on the demand of the field. Apart from my marital status my caste identity was a major area of interest amongst the participants. I could sense the disappointment when they failed to gather much from my name since I do not use my caste name as my last name. Though most of them wanted to know, they were hesitant to ask directly. In case anyone happened to ask openly, others would come to defend that caste identity does not matter to us but just want to know about it. There were times I would try to avoid the question but then I realized that I was expecting the participants to share with me their intimate thoughts while abstaining from sharing the caste identity. Caste identity is very integral to the nature of interactions, and their lives have revolved around caste and caste-based institutions. It ensured that the power structure between the researcher and the participants also breaks through a mutual sharing of information.

Reflexivity is of prime importance in research. It does not remain more unconsciously confined to the researcher but also requires participants to exercise reflexivity by participating in

methodologically designed tools for the purpose of the research. Therefore through methodological tools, I have tried to capture the reflections both as participants and a researcher through the maintenance of daily journals. As can be seen, research gives a space to include the voices of the marginalized, at the same time as a researcher also has to state our positionality in the research explicitly. This makes culture and identity very crucial in the whole research process. Hence it is crucial to make the study a more collective and democratic sphere of conducting research. Awareness about a participant's emotional and familial support system played a crucial role when the environment becomes emotionally sensitive. It also helped in developing a sense of respect between the participants and with researchers because they understand each other's positionality and their socio-economic location. Although as a researcher I got to know about the participants in much detail, I am unsure of how comfortable I would have been if the participants would have had the same level of accessibility to get to know my personality. Throughout the research I realized the need to open up with participants. This led to two-way interaction between the participants and researcher, where I also shared my personal life (but was very limited and selective) and experience with them. This resulted in very strong rapport building with the participants and they trusted me to a larger extent. At the same time I also feared that this might act negatively in terms of participants developing perceptions about the researcher that might jeopardize the research process.

In the process of research, one needs to give up the 'othering' of certain communities which are looked down upon as inferior and hence needs to be studied so that their conditions can be improved. There is no denying there are inequalities, and there are groups within the society which are marginalized, and their living conditions need to be improved. The process of research has resulted in unlearning of the knowledge hierarchies, which has dominantly shaped the understanding of development. By raising the questions such as "What is Development?", "Whose development?" and "Who identifies the need for development and its solution?" I have unlearned the ingrained knowledge hierarchy to some extent by acknowledging its diversity. I have begun to look at social work from a broader perspective of how to conduct research that would not lead to the imposition of our ideas of development on the 'other' we created in the research process. It is in this backdrop of breaking the knowledge hierarchy between the self and the other that I have tried to practice research.

To break this knowledge hierarchy, I have also tried to make the research process participatory. A step towards participatory research was shifting from the use of term respondent (sees researched as passively) to participants (respecting the subjectivity of the researched) It helped in capturing the overall understanding of the participants and the context within which the action is being carried out. The biggest strength is that its captures subjectivity and makes the researcher aware of the multiple-reality or the various social worlds of the participants, which is also inter-subjective in relation to their surroundings. This respect for subjectivity gave an empowerment angle to the whole process of research. To empower is to enable individuals and groups to make purposive choices towards desired actions and outcomes.

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Katarzyna Wojnicka (2021) Men and masculinities in times of crisis: between care and protection, *NORMA*, 16:1, 1-5, DOI: [10.1080/18902138.2021.1885860](https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2021.1885860)