

Abstract

'Left Behind Women' and the Ethical Dilemma of Care and Protection

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Spatial bias in migration research has led to an overemphasis on the research on migrants, while the lives of non-migrant members of the family have remained under-explored. Unearthing the life of 'Left Behind Women' or the non-migrant wives of migrant men can be a valuable site for academic inquiry for understanding the interaction between migration, gender relations, and rural society. In the flood-affected Kosi region of Bihar, the combined effect of ecological disaster and repressive socio-economic and political structure puts undue pressure on people to undertake different forms of mobilities simultaneously, including temporary relocation to frequent resettlement and migration, among others.

The responsibility of care and protection are embedded within different spheres of everyday life, shaping social relationships. There is a gendered division of care and protection responsibilities in the family and community, with care perceived as a woman's domain while protection is considered the man's liability. The household and society get fragmented when there is a long absence of men who migrate, leaving their wives behind. It results in the transgression of women's responsibilities, putting them in an ethical dilemma. The situation gets further complicated when located in an ecologically sensitive space of annual flooding. Women in the Kosi region are the agents of ensuring care and protection responsibilities, simultaneously in need of care and protection from the wrath of yearly flooding.

Through analysis of 12 interviews and focused group discussions, the paper attempt to understand the practices and ethical dilemmas around care and protection arising from the everyday life of 'Left Behind Women.' What are the sites of care and protection in the flood-affected region? What are the gender norms and values around care and protection, and how have they changed in the situation of long absence of men in the flood-affected regio of Kosi?

Keywords: Flood, left behind women, care and protection