

Husband's international migration Decision-making autonomy among left-behind wives in rural area of central Myanmar

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the effects of the husband's migration on wives' decision-making autonomy.

Design/methodology/approach – The study setting is Magway Region of central Myanmar where poverty has driven adult males to migrate overseas. The study hypothesizes that the absence of husbands due to international migration leads to changes in the roles and decision-making power of left-behind wives. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in 22 villages of Pakkoku district, Magway Region, using the multi-stage random sampling method. The study sample included 205 migrant's wives and 196 non-migrant's wives.

Findings – The international migration of husbands has a strong and positive impact on left-behind wives' autonomy independent of individual characteristics and household social and economic status. In addition, the findings show that the number of children and household wealth are positively associated with women's autonomy, whereas household size shows a negative association.

Research limitations/implications – It is possible that there will be unmeasured selection factors such as unsuccessful migration as it might influence both husbands' migration status and women's autonomy. Cross-sectional data also invite a question about the causal relationship. For example, it might be possible that women with high autonomy may be more likely to encourage their husband to work abroad. So, the relationship might be the other way around. A further longitudinal study is also needed to describe detail explanation about the causal influence of left-behind women's autonomy.

Originality/value – Successful international migration has an impact not only on women's autonomy but also on household economic status in central rural Myanmar.

Keywords International migration, Central rural Myanmar, Women decision-making autonomy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon deeply affecting not only the lives of more than 200m migrants, but also of the people connected to the migrants, particularly those left behind in the countries of origin[1]. However, most of the researchers have mainly focused on the impact of migration on left-behind older parents and children. In reality, left-behind housewives of migrants are those who have to take care of these parents and children with the aid of remittance money they receive from their migrant husbands.

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Since 1988, thousands of Myanmar men have emigrated to the neighboring countries. According to 2014 Myanmar Population and Household Census, approximately 2m household members were reported to be living outside Myanmar. Among them, about 1.2m were males, representing 61 percent of the total migrant population. The census further showed that out of 2m migrants abroad, about 1.7m (83 percent) aged between 15 and 39, and up to 1.1m in this age bracket were males. This means that young active males are more likely to migrate internationally[2].

In many societies, the status of women often limits their autonomy and ability to make decisions about many aspects of their own lives, especially in developing or low-income countries[3]. In many Asian and Pacific countries, substantial gender equality gains have been made in urban areas with respect to education, health and employment. However, rural women lag behind despite their work being multifaceted and demanding both as family workers and agricultural laborers. Development innovations, such as microcredit and self-help groups, promote rural women's economic development, but emerging evidence suggests that gender equality in rural communities is far from an everyday reality. Social and traditional perceptions regarding women's responsibilities and their capacities continue to hamper women's progress[4]. In Myanmar culture, women are still subordinate in society especially in rural area[5].

The census also shows that young adult male migrants from Magway Region are predominantly moved overseas compared to border areas. Magway Region is situated in the central dry zone of Myanmar where 85 percent of the rural poor people live[2]. While the role of remittances in the economic development of sending communities has already received much attention, the social and cultural consequences of international migration on left-behind women have not been adequately explored. A very few studies have focused on left-behind wives who are not migrants themselves but are vulnerable due to the migration process.

This study focuses on several migration-related factors, which facilitate or constrain changes in economic status, household decision-making power and freedom of physical movement called women autonomy. It can be hypothesized that the absence of husband from household leads to changes in the roles and in the decision-making power of left-behind women.

Theory background

Autonomy is the ability to obtain information and make decisions about one's own concerns. It facilitates access to material resources such as food, land, income and other forms of wealth, and to social resources such as knowledge, power, prestige within the family and community. Evidence from other developing countries shows that women's age and family structure are the strongest determinants of women's authority in decision making. Acharya found that the migration has defined women's overall position in the community as gender-related power differentials in the household, declaring how important the family unit is to understanding the operation of gender in a society[6].

The relationship between economic change and family change is one of the most studied topics in social science. Scholars as early as Marx pointed out that the social effects of changes in the mode of production lead to family changes due to shift of capitalist mode of production[7]. Kingsley Davis highlighted that one of the biggest changes for gender roles resulted from the "shift of locus of work from home to somewhere else"[8]. When males or females move their productive activities from home to factory, they practice more freedom in their daily lives and less control over family. These shifts in the place of production may have potential effect on women to experience independent control of their lives. The rise of international labor migration, in both the less developed and more developed world, leads to dramatic family changes[9] (Figure 1).

Men's migration is perceived as a common practice characterizing the intention of searching for work, often resulting in leaving their wives and children in the place of origin. In the absence of their husbands, women may take on very different roles with regard to household. Women become more challenging and can exercise more independent control of their lives including budgetary management. These new roles may be accompanied by amplified authority in spending, decision making in economic matters and freedom of movement, dimensions that have typically been used to define women's autonomy[10].

Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes the following:

- H1. Husband's migration has positive effects on the left-behind wives' decision-making autonomy.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional analytical survey design. The study population was ever-married women of the age between 15 and 49 years old in the rural communities of Magway Region, both with migrant and non-migrant husbands.

Migrant husbands are defined as those who have been working abroad for at least six months. Women whose husbands were returned migrants, migrants who had been abroad for less than six months or internally migrated were excluded from this study because the study would like to focus on the current effect of cross-border migration. Non-migrant husbands are those who have never moved internationally or internally for more than six months and are currently living in the same household with the study women.

In Magway Region, the total number of international migrants is 84,422, of which 66,023 are males and 18,399 are females. Within Magway Region, Pakokku district was selected because it has the highest prevalence of international migrants compared to the other four districts[2].

Primary data were collected by face-to-face interviews using a pre-tested, structured questionnaire. Before the data collection, the questionnaire was pretested with ten married women with migrant and non-migrant husbands from a village near Naypyidaw Region. After the pre-test, the questionnaire was revised and finalized accordingly. Each questionnaire included three sections: background characteristics, socio-economic status such as house characteristics, household asset, female labor force participation, household structure and women's autonomy indicators within families in both migrant and non-migrant wives in the rural community. Five members of interviewers from the staff of University of Community Health were recruited and trained on the objectives of the study and questionnaires.

A multi-staged sampling method was used to collect data in this study. The probability method of sampling, i.e. simple random sampling method, was used in every step of this study (Figure 2).

First stage

Out of the five townships in Pakokku district, the Top 2 highest townships with international migration (Myaing and Pauk) were selected. Then, 25 village tracts with the highest number of migrants were drawn from each township according to the 2014

Figure 1.
Men's labor migration change roles of women in the household[10]



Myanmar Housing Census data. After that ten village tracts were randomly selected from the list of total 50 village tracts.

Second stage

There are three to five villages per village tract. From each randomly selected village tract, two villages were randomly selected. Therefore, in total, 20 villages were included.

Third stage

In each of the randomly selected village, the list of international migrants' and non-migrants' wives was obtained with the support of local authorities and Basic Health Staff. Then, the wives in the lists were assigned with the number of migrant and non-migrant. After preparing the sampling frame for wives in the village, ten migrants' wives and comparable ten non-migrants' wives according to international migrants proportion related to baseline population were randomly selected from the lists. At least ten migrants' wives and ten non-migrants' wives were selected from each village. At the end, for 22 villages, a total of 220 migrants' wives and 215 non-migrants' wives (total 435 respondents) were included in the survey. After data editing and cleaning, 201 migrants' wives and 196 non-migrants' wives together yielded a total of 401 married women who were included in the analysis.

The main problems encountered in the field during data collection were transportation difficulties going to selected villages and waiting time of selected samples in their home because of going to their working farm.

Measurement of variables

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is women's decision-making autonomy, measured based on three dimensions, namely economic decision making, household decision making and physical movement. The indicators for each dimension are derived from the work of Mason and Smith[11], cited in Haque's study[12]. Economic decision making includes four indicators: spending money on food, clothing, social ceremonies and purchase of property and assets. Household decision making refers to the extent of women's ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions on household affairs. It is calculated based on five indicators: children's health care, own health care, use of contraceptives, family planning methods and food to be cooked each day. Physical movement refers to the freedom of women to move to their necessary places with their own choices. It is calculated based on three indicators: a visit to relatives and friends, shopping and participating in social and traditional affairs. The decision-making autonomy of women is measured based on each of the above 12 items.

The question for each item asked "who usually decide on the following various important household matters?" If women make decision alone, it is scored as "2 points." If women just participate in decision-making process jointly with her husband or others, it is scored as

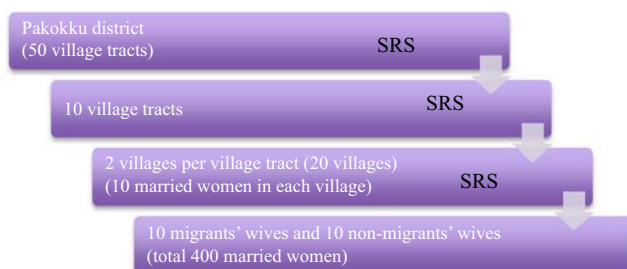


Figure 2.
Multi-stage sampling
method

“1 point.” Other responses such as husband alone or others, which reflects that women do not participate in decision making are given “0 point.” Adding score of all 12 activities gives total score and then classified as low, medium and high autonomy by Mean \pm 1 SD basics.

Independent variables

The main independent variable is husband’s current international migration status, measured as a dichotomous variable. The variable is coded as “1” if the woman’s husband is currently an international labor migrant and is coded “0” for a non-migrant’s wife. Household economic status, measured as the wealth composite index, is used as a proxy of household economic status. This composite measure is calculated using easy-to-collect data on a household quality such as type of housing and ownership status, household’s assets and environmental conditions such as type of water access, type of latrine used and main source of lighting in the household. All of these seven questions responses are weighed and scored as 3 = highest, 2 = moderate and 1 = lowest status according to 2014 Myanmar Housing Census[13]. And then the total score was summed up and classified as poor, moderate and wealthy by mean \pm 1 SD basics.

Other independent variables include household structure and female labor force participation. Household structure is operationalized based on questions asked about household composition and head of household. If a woman lives with someone (parents or in-laws) other than children and husband of the respondent in the same household, the household is considered as an “extended family” (Code 1), otherwise, the household is a “nuclear family” (Code 0)[14].

Female labor force participation is measured by whether women work or not. If women participate in work, type of work and work characteristics are asked in accordance with 2014 Myanmar Housing Census’s labor force participation. Type of work is classified as employee (government and private), employer, own account worker and contributing as family worker.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were first used to provide summary statistics of socio-demographic characteristics of women, their husbands and socio economic status of household. Bivariate and multivariate analyses using multiple regression models were used for the identification of the net effects of husband’s international migration on left-behind women’s decision-making autonomy measured as a continuous variable. Ordinary least square method was used.

Ethical issue

Internal Review Board of IPSR with COA. No. 2017/06-134 issued on June 29, 2017, Mahidol University, Thailand, and Ethical Review Committee of Department of Medical Research, Ministry of Health and Sports, Myanmar, with approval number Ethics/DMR/2017/099 issued on July 31, 2017 had approved this research.

Results

The data in Table I, overall, suggest that the wives of migrants and wives of non-migrants poses different characteristics at least in terms of age, education and their occupation. The wives of non-migrants are older than those of migrants (38.2 vs 34.7 years in average with $p < 0.001$). The majority of wives in both groups are at the primary school level, 46.3 percent wives of migrant husbands and 45.4 percent wives of non-migrant husbands. There is no significant difference in the education status of wives in both groups ($p = 0.284$).

There is a significant difference in age and type of occupation among migrant and non-migrant husbands. Similar to women, non-migrant husbands are significantly older than migrant husbands (40.0 vs 35.9 years). As for the type of occupation, whereas the vast

Individual characteristics	Husband's migration status		p-value
	Non-migrant (n = 196)	Migrant (n = 205)	
<i>Wives' characteristics</i>			
Age (Mean ± SD (range))	38.2±8.4 (18–49)	34.7±6.2 (21–49)	0.001
Education			0.284
Illiterate	11.7	16.6	
Primary	45.4	46.3	
Middle or higher	42.9	37.1	
Working status			0.155
Currently working	60.7	53.2	
Currently not working	39.3	46.8	
Decision to marry			0.948
Decision made by their own	83.2	83.9	
Decision made by others	16.8	16.1	
Migration experience			0.068
Ever moved before	20.4	28.8	
Never moved before	79.6	71.2	
Duration of marriage (Mean ± SD (range) (years))	15.2±9.2 (1–33)	12.3±7.3 (1–36)	0.005
<i>Husband's characteristics</i>			
Age (Mean ± SD (range))	40.0±8.8 (21–61)	35.9±7.3 (20–52)	< 0.001
Education			0.739
Illiterate	17.3	19	
Primary	43.9	45.9	
Middle or higher	38.8	35.1	
Type of work			< 0.001
Private employee	36.7	89.3	
Own account workers	40.3	3.4	
Contributing family works	15.3	5.4	
Others	7.7	1.9	

Table I. Background characteristics of wives and husbands between migrant and non-migrant study sample

majority of migrant husbands work as private employee (89.3 percent), non-migrant husbands working as private employee account for only 36.7 percent. There is no significant difference in the educational level between migrant and non-migrant husbands. The highest proportion of them completed primary school level is 45.9 percent for migrant and 43.9 percent for non-migrant husbands.

As shown in Table II, a significant difference is found in total number of household size and head of household ($p < 0.001$) between households of migrants' and non-migrants' wives. The mean of household size is 3.9 for households of migrants' wives and 5.1 for non-migrants' wives. As for household head, data indicate that the majority of household head is husband in the households of non-migrants' wives, accounting for 68.9 percent, whereas only one-third (33.2 percent) are headed by husbands in the households of migrants' wives. No significant differences are found in the type of household and number of children between households of migrants' and non-migrants' wives.

More than half of the women participate in labor force in this study. The proportion of working status of migrants' wives is 53.2 percent, which is less than the non-migrant's wives 60.7 percent. Regarding the type of occupation among the wives, the largest proportion of migrants' wives work as own account workers (34.9 percent) followed by employee (private) and contributing family workers, 31.2 percent each, whereas the largest proportion of non-migrants' wives work as contributing family workers (28.6 percent), followed by own account worker (26.9 percent) and employer (private) (22.7 percent), accordingly.

Household economic status is measured on the basis of the household asset score as well as main income generator of the study sample. Whereas there is no significant difference in

Table II.
Socio-economic status
of study population
by husband's
migration status

Socio-economic status	Husband's migration status		p-value
	Non-migrant (n = 196)	Migrant (n = 205)	
<i>Household structure</i>			
Household size (Mean ± SD (range))	5.1 ± 1.8 (2–12)	3.9 ± 1.7 (1–10)	< 0.001
Number of children (Mean ± SD (range))	2.0 ± 1.4 (0–7)	1.8 ± 1.2 (0–7)	0.069
Head of household			< 0.001
Husband	68.9	33.2	
Wife	1.5	32.2	
Other	29.6	34.6	
Type of household			0.931
Extended	46.4	49.3	
Nuclear	53.6	51.7	
<i>Household economic status</i>			
Wealth index score (Mean ± SD (range))	16.2 ± 2.4 (9–21)	16.2 ± 2.6 (9–21)	0.984
Main income generator			< 0.001
Husband	73.5	85.4	
Wife	4.1	6.8	
Other	22.4	7.8	

wealth scores, there is a significant difference in main income earner between migrants' and non-migrants' wives ($p < 0.001$). In the families of migrants' wives, the majority (85.4 percent) report husbands as main income contributor, compared with 73.5 percent in the families of non-migrant's wives.

Women's autonomy among migrants' and non-migrants' wives

The mean scores of decision-making autonomy are a composite measure of three dimensions concerning household status, economic status and physical movements. The results show that the mean score of women's autonomy is significantly higher among migrants' wives (17.1) compared with non-migrants' wives (15.3) with a p -value of less than 0.001. This exploratory analysis preliminary suggests that the migration of husband might improve women's decision-making autonomy. When women's autonomy score is classified into three groups by a mean above and below of 1 standard deviation (low autonomy ≤ 12 , medium $> 12-20 <$ and high ≥ 20). The proportion of having high level of autonomy is higher among the wives of migrants (26.8 percent) compared with the wives of non-migrants (9.7 percent) (Table III).

Multivariate analysis

Table IV presents results from the multiple linear regression which examines the association between migration status of husband and women's autonomy, taking into account other related variables simultaneously. Two models were explored. Model 1 tests

Table III.
Difference in women
decision-making
autonomy mean
scores between
migrants' and non-
migrants' wives

Women autonomy score	Husband's migration status		p-value
	Migrants (n = 205)	Non-migrants (n = 196)	
Level of women autonomy			< 0.001
Low	30 (14.6)	39 (19.9)	
Medium	120 (58.5)	138 (70.4)	
High	55 (26.8)	19 (9.7)	
Mean ± SD (range)	17.1±3.8 (8–24)	15.4±3.5 (3–24)	< 0.001

Independent variables	<i>B</i>	Model 1 95%CI	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	Model 2 95%CI	<i>p</i>
<i>Husband is migrant</i>	1.79	0.91, 2.66	0.000	1.07	0.19, 1.95	0.017
<i>Individual characteristics</i>						
Age	-0.05	-0.15, 0.04	0.311	-0.06	-0.15, 0.03	0.213
Education (ref: illiterate)						
Primary	0.03	-1.20, 1.26	0.963	-0.07	-1.25, 1.10	0.901
Middle+	0.51	-0.76, 1.77	0.435	0.42	-0.79, 1.64	0.496
Currently work	0.58	-0.16, 1.31	0.127	0.59	-0.11, 1.29	0.101
Made decision to marry by their own	0.45	-0.46, 1.37	0.334	0.33	-0.59, 1.25	0.262
Ever moved before	0.40	-0.49, 1.28	0.381	0.46	-0.43, 1.34	0.288
Duration of marriage	0.02	-0.05, 0.09	0.633	0.03	-0.04, 0.10	0.965
<i>Husband's characteristics</i>						
Age	0.05	-0.04, 0.14	0.287	0.29	-0.08, 0.09	0.862
Education (ref: illiterate)						
Primary	0.14	-0.95, 1.22	0.807	0.15	-0.88, 1.18	0.777
Middle+	-0.05	-1.21, 1.11	0.933	0.09	-1.01, -1.01	0.873
Work as private employee	-0.08	-1.02, 0.87	0.875	-0.05	-0.95, 0.85	0.912
<i>Household economic status</i>						
Wealth index	0.20	0.04, 0.34	0.010	0.20	0.05, 0.34	0.006
Husband as income generator	0.53	-0.36, 1.43	0.250	-0.19	-1.08, 0.70	0.680
<i>Household structure</i>						
Household size				-0.58	-0.84, -0.33	0.000
Number of children				0.72	0.36, 1.06	0.000
Nuclear household				0.38	-0.51, 1.27	0.402
<i>n</i>		401			401	
<i>p</i> -value		0.001			0.000	
<i>R</i> ²		0.0925			0.1875	

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international
migration

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Table IV.
Multiple linear
regression of factors
contributing to
women's autonomy
among migrants and
non-migrants' wives

how international migration of husband is associated with women's autonomy while controlling for women's individual and husband's characteristics (age, education), women's working status, husband's type of work, duration of marriage, as well as women's previous migration experience. Model 1 also controls for household economic status, measured by wealth scores and main income generator. Model 2 follows the conceptual framework which posits that husband's migration status might affect women's autonomy through changes in the household structure. Therefore, variables related to household structure were included in Model 2 to see if the effect of husband's migration status on women's autonomy remains after taking into account household structure, i.e. household size, number of children and type of household.

According to Model 1, the results show that international migration of husband is positively related to women's autonomy, net of other women's and their husband's characteristics. Women whose husband is a migrant have 1.79 scores of autonomy higher than those with non-migrant husband. In addition to husband's migration status, Model 1 also suggests that wealth index is significantly associated with women's autonomy in a positive way. An additional score of wealth index is associated with additional 0.20 score of women's autonomy. Other variables of women's and their husband's characteristics are not significantly related with women's autonomy.

After including the household structure in Model 2, the results confirm the significant, positive relationship between husband's migration status and women's autonomy, although the level of significance decreases from 0.001 to 0.05 level and the coefficient decreases from

1.79 to 1.07. The wealth index also remains significantly positive on women's autonomy, with no change in its coefficient. The model's R^2 improves when the household structure was added into the model. Household structure variables significantly related to women's autonomy are the household size and number of children. Whereas an increase in household size significantly reduces women's autonomy, an increase in the number of children significantly improves women's autonomy.

Discussion

Previous research mentioned that the international migration of husband could bring dramatic transformation in their left-behind household. The absence of adult men from their family due to international migration provides and promotes the development of women's decision making, autonomy, role expansion and self-esteem. This adjustment process depends upon several factors such as their relationship with migrants, the length of stay of the migrants overseas and socio-economic context in which they live. Male migration have a direct impact on the demographic characteristics such as the age, sex and household structures of the sending communities[15].

According to the results of background characteristics of study sample compared between migrant and non-migrant, mean age of non-migrants' wives and husband is significantly older than that of migrant sample. This is similar to the study on the changes of wives' position among the left-behind in rural Bangladesh study[16]. The primary level of education in nearly half of study sample reflected the average education of rural population, indicating no significant difference between migrant and non-migrant population. Most of the migrant husbands worked as "private employee," whereas non-migrant husbands worked in their own farm in their village as "own account work."

Regarding socio economic factors of the study sample between migrants and non-migrants' wives, the mean family size is significantly larger in non-migrant household but number of children and type of household (extended & nuclear) are not much different between migrant and non-migrant households. There is a significant difference in total people and head of household between migrants and non-migrant households. Emigration of husbands may have positive and negative impact on left-behind wives. Literature stated that wives are facing extra responsibilities, heavier workload and stress such as socio-economic challenges and separation of the partners and further consequences[17, 18]. Unlike above statement, in this study the migrants' wives participate in less work compared to non-migrants' wives which indicates that the wives of migrant husbands have no more work burden. It might be due to the advantages of receiving remittances from their husbands. But the difference in the economic status shown with wealth composite index is insignificant between migrants' and non-migrants' wives. Similarly, the findings of Bangladesh demographic surveillance system data show that the individual and socio-economic characteristics of women are much more pronounced among migrant rather than non-migrant families[18]. Male international migration has definitely impacted their left-behind wives through changes in social and economic status of their household.

In this study, not only overall mean score of decision-making autonomy, but also level of women autonomy is significantly higher in migrants' wives compared to non-migrants' wives. This finding supports that there is no more burden on migrant wives in the absence of their husbands because they can compensate by the rise in their household socio-economic status leading to the capability of independent decision making in household matters.

The findings from the multivariate analysis using multiple regression models show that net of individual characteristics of women and their husbands, household economic status, household structure and husband's international migration status helps improve women's autonomy directly and independently. This is confirmed by another set of analysis among migrants' wives only, which shows higher autonomy after migration of their husbands.

Previous literature indicates that the impact of migration on women decision-making process may vary depending upon the social category and family size to which they belong to[15]. Evidence from other developing countries shows that women's age and family structure are the strongest determinants of women's authority in decision making[6]. The findings of this present study show that after taking into account the characteristics considered in past research as potentially conditioning on the effects of migration, the independent impact of migration of husband remains strong and impacts positively on wives' autonomy.

The independent effects of husband's migration on improving wives' autonomy may be explained as discussed in the previous literature that in the absence of their husband, women are in charge of roles previously assumed by their husbands. One of the biggest changes for gender role resulted from the "shift of the locus of work from the home to somewhere else"[8]. In case of Myanmar, the increased autonomy of migrants' wives may not be through working outside, as we do not see the higher labor force participation among migrants' wives. In fact, we find lower labor force participation among the wives of migrants after their husbands have worked abroad. The higher autonomy among the wives of migrants than the wives of non-migrants and the improved autonomy after the migration of husbands among the wives of migrants is indicative of higher power in making decision on matters related to household status, economic status and physical movement that women gain in the absence of their husband.

This study's findings to some extent support previous research which suggests that the absence of their husband allows women to enjoy more autonomy at the household level as substitute authority compared to non-migrant household[9]. Migration of husbands can also bring about dramatic transformation on the traditional values, beliefs and attitudes among women. According to the previous relevant literature, in the absence of their husband, women would take full responsibilities of their emigrant spouses and these new roles would give them greater decision-making ability, freedom, autonomy and greater access to, and control of, resources (e.g. money, food), resulting in increased empowerment. Similarly, the findings of Bangladesh demographic surveillance system data show that international migration of husbands has a significantly positive relationship with women's decision making and women's autonomy in rural area[18].

One of the findings suggests that larger household is negatively related with women's autonomy. In Myanmar culture, the larger household might imply living together with older people like parents or in-laws or other senior relatives. This might discourage the women to take head of the house role and reduce women's decision-making autonomy.

The positive relationship between wealth index, as a proxy of household economic status and number of children, and women's autonomy is consistent with Safilios-Rothschild's theory, which posits that there are various sources of power for women in the household. One of the sources generated through men are number of children and their husbands' socioeconomic status. The other sources of power include women's age, education and their earning from economic activities[19]. However, this present study does not find significant effects of age and education on women's autonomy.

Conclusion and recommendation

The results of linear regression support the study's hypotheses that the effect of husbands' international migration is positively related to wives' decision-making autonomy at the household level. Additionally, the findings also show the impact of the household structure, including household size, number of children and economic status, stating better wealth condition significantly affects women's decision-making autonomy. This finding reveals that successful international migration has definitely impacted not only women's autonomy but also household economic status in central rural Myanmar. When male members of the family migrate and remittances are sent to their wives, it leads to restructuring the political

structure of the migrants' family and the wives of the international migrants have power/control over the family. As women take on new roles and responsibilities, it is possible that gender ideologies regarding what women are capable of doing and achieving will also change. Both of these can improve women's status and lead to women empowerment in that rural community. Therefore, Myanmar women left behind in rural areas can take responsibilities in the absence of their husbands. In the absence of working-age men, women can fill in their places by using their new-found force of empowerment.

Consequently, the social and economic impacts of successful process of international migration should not limit to individual and household levels. Rather, migration's benefits should be extended to community and society levels. Government policy should facilitate international migration as a strategic plan to grow as a source of development, economic and social progress.

Limitation of study

Like almost all of observational social science research, this study was constrained by the potential endogeneity of men's labor migration. It is possible that there will be unmeasured selection factors such as unsuccessful migration as it might influence both husbands' migration status and women's autonomy.

Second, this study has adopted a cross-sectional study design. Thus, the results may generate biased estimates of the impact of migration on women's decision-making autonomy because families that are relatively better-off may be more likely than others to send their members overseas. Cross-sectional data also invite a question about causal relationship. For example, it might be possible that women with high autonomy may be more likely to encourage their husband to work abroad. So, the relationship might be the other way around. Further longitudinal study is also needed to provide detailed explanation about the causal influence of left-behind women's autonomy.

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