

MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN BIHAR: CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES AND GENDER ROLES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationship between migration and social change in Bihar, with a specific focus on shifting family structures and evolving gender roles. Bihar has witnessed large-scale outmigration, particularly of male members, to metropolitan cities in search of employment. This phenomenon has led to significant transformations within the socio-cultural fabric of rural communities. The research investigates how prolonged male absence has altered traditional family dynamics, increased the responsibilities of women, and reshaped gender relations. Through fieldwork conducted in select districts of Bihar, the study examines the experiences of women who are left behind to manage households, raise children, and engage in community affairs—often taking on roles traditionally reserved for men. The paper also assesses whether these changes have led to greater empowerment or reinforced existing patriarchal constraints. Using a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative interviews and quantitative household data, this study contributes to the broader discourse on migration-induced social transformation in developing regions. The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive policies that recognize the changing realities of rural households in migration-prone areas like Bihar.

Keywords-Migration, Development, Social Change, Gender Roles, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Historical Migration Patterns in Bihar

Pre-Independence Era:

The migration phenomenon from Bihar can be traced back to the Mughal era and continued through the colonial period. During Mughal times, warrior communities and castes from western Bihar were recruited into the Mughal army, a practice that persisted under British rule. As the British Raj solidified in the latter half of the 19th century, improvements in trade, commerce, and infrastructure—such as roads and railways—facilitated migration. The western part of India saw advancements in irrigation and specialized cropping patterns, attracting migrant laborers from densely populated eastern regions like Bihar, which lagged in agricultural development.

During the colonial period, Bihar experienced significant out-migration driven by economic distress, famines, and forced labor recruitment. Many Biharis were sent as indentured laborers to British colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, and Suriname to work on plantations, propelled by poverty, landlessness, and the exploitative Zamindari system. The Zamindari system, with its high land rents, minimal tenant rights, and widespread landlessness, coupled with declining agricultural productivity due to indigo cultivation, also spurred eastward migration toward Bengal and Assam. This migration was predominantly seasonal, involving lower-caste landless laborers responding to wage disparities between Bihar and eastern India. Such circular migration enabled marginal farmers and agricultural laborers to meet bare-minimum subsistence needs.

Additionally, limited industrialization in colonial India drove migration from Bihar to urban centers like Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai), where Biharis found work in jute mills, railways, and ports.¹

Post-Independence Migration Patterns in Bihar (1947–1990s)

Rural-to-Urban Migration: Post-independence, Bihar's agrarian economy faced challenges such as overpopulation, fragmented landholdings, and limited industrial growth. These factors drove migration to urban centers within India, particularly industrial hubs like Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai, where Biharis found employment in informal sectors, construction, and small-scale industries.

Green Revolution Impact (1960s–1970s): The Green Revolution in states like Punjab and Haryana created a high demand for agricultural laborers, attracting Bihari workers as Bihar's agriculture remained rain-dependent and less productive. This westward migration surged in the 1960s, with the influx of Bihari laborers spilling over into Haryana .

Inter-State Migration: Bihar emerged as a significant source of migrant labor to northern and western India, with workers employed in low-skill jobs such as rickshaw pulling, street vending, and manual labor. The westward trend of labor migration continued, but after the 1980s, the demand in Green Revolution areas like Punjab and Haryana declined due to changes in cropping patterns and agricultural mechanization .

Shifting Migration Trends (Post-1980s): Since the 1980s, the volume of migration from Bihar has increased significantly, encompassing all sections of the state across castes, communities, and economic groups. Previously, migration was primarily seasonal and directed toward rural areas for agricultural wages. However, recent trends show a shift toward more permanent migration to metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Surat, and Kolkata . Migration and remittances have become a key livelihood strategy for Biharis.²

Migration Statistics:

- Between 1951 and 1961, approximately 4% of Bihar's population migrated (Sharma 1997).
- Between 1971 and 1981, about 2% of the population migrated, with the total number of migrants reaching around 2.5 million by 1981 (Sharma 1997).
- During the inter-censal period of 2001–2011, approximately 9.3 million Biharis migrated (Census 2011).

CURRENT MIGRATION PATTERNS IN BIHAR

Scale and Trends

- **Out-Migration Dominance:** Bihar is one of India's largest migrant-sending states, with approximately 10–12 million Biharis migrating annually for work, primarily to states like Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, and West Bengal, as reported by the *Economic Survey of Bihar (2020-21)*.
- **Seasonal and Circular Migration:** A significant portion of migration is seasonal or circular, with workers returning to Bihar during agricultural seasons or festivals, particularly among rural, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers.

¹ Breman, J. (1985). *Of peasants, migrants, and paupers: rural labour circulation and capitalist production in west India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

² Davis, K. (1951). *The Population of India and Pakistan*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

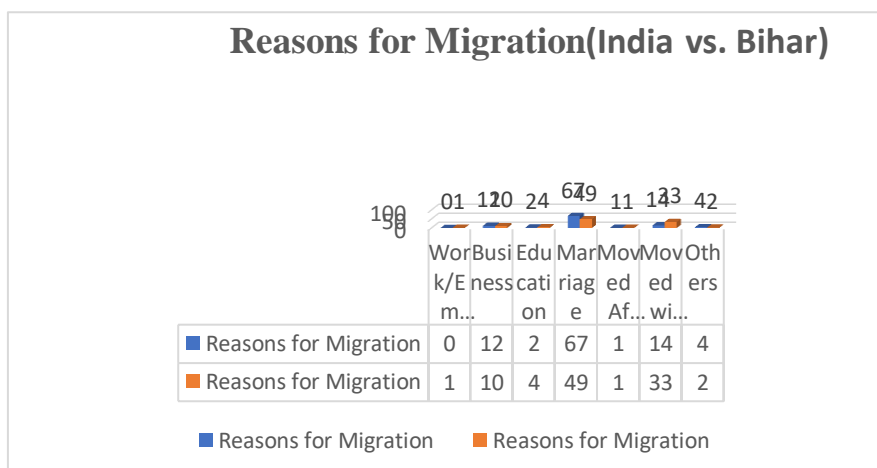
- **Urban Destinations:** Major migration hubs include Delhi-NCR (construction and informal sector), Mumbai (manufacturing and services), Bengaluru (IT support and security services), and Hyderabad, alongside industrial centers like Surat (textile industry) and Ludhiana (manufacturing).
- **Emerging Trends:** There is increasing migration to southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu for construction and hospitality sectors due to higher wages, as well as a growing trend of skilled and semi-skilled migration (e.g., electricians, plumbers) to Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Demographics

- **Profile of Migrants:** Migrants are predominantly young males aged 15–40 years from rural areas, often belonging to marginalized castes such as Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Women’s migration is lower but rising, particularly in domestic work and garment industries.
- **Education and Skills:** Most migrants are low-skilled or semi-skilled, but a growing number of educated youth are migrating for white-collar jobs, including in the IT sector and civil services coaching hubs like Delhi.³

Key Drivers

- **Economic Factors:** Despite recent economic growth, Bihar lags in industrial development and job creation, with a per capita income of \$1,150 in 2022-23, among India’s lowest, pushing workers to seek better opportunities elsewhere.
- **Unemployment and Underemployment:** High unemployment rates (7.2% in 2022-23, per CMIE) and reliance on agriculture (over 50% of the workforce) drive out-migration.
- **Social Networks:** Established migrant networks and community ties in destination cities facilitate continued migration.
- **Infrastructure and Urbanization Gaps:** Limited urban development in Bihar compared to other states encourages migration to metropolitan areas.



Source: Calculated using Census 2011.

Migration is the movement of individuals or groups from one geographical location to another, either temporarily or permanently, with the intention of settling, working, or

³ *Census of India*. (2011). Migration Tables. Office of the Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

improving living conditions. It can occur within a country (internal migration) or across national borders (international migration).

In the context of Bihar, migration is primarily:

- Economic in nature, driven by poverty, unemployment, and lack of local opportunities.
- Male-dominated, with men migrating to cities or abroad for labor work.
- Often circular or seasonal, meaning migrants return home periodically.

Migration significantly influences social dynamics, family relationships, and gender roles in the areas of origin.

Social Change refers to the significant and lasting transformation in the values, norms, behaviors, institutions, and social relationships within a society over time. It can be gradual or rapid and may occur due to factors such as economic development, migration, education, technological advancements, or political movements.

In the context of Bihar, social change is being shaped by:

- **Large-scale migration**
- **Shifting family structures**
- **Changing gender roles**

These changes are altering traditional ways of living, decision-making patterns, and the socio-economic roles of individuals, especially women.

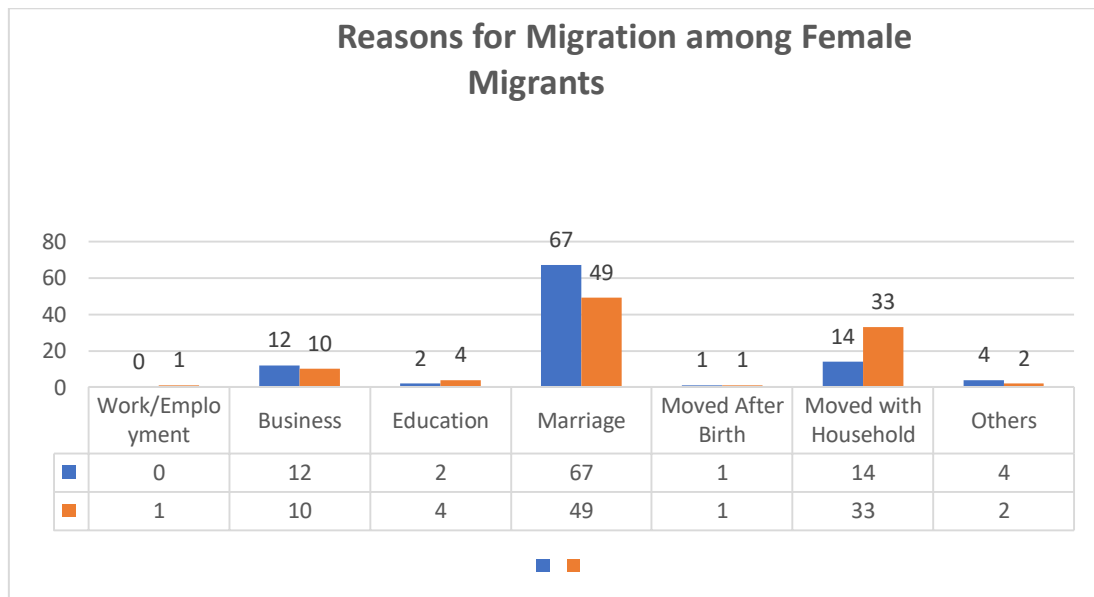
Gender roles refer to the set of social and cultural expectations, norms, and behaviors that a society considers appropriate for individuals based on their biological sex (male or female). These roles define how men and women should think, act, and interact in both public and private spheres.⁴

Key aspects of gender roles include:

- **Division of labor** (e.g., men as breadwinners, women as homemakers)
- **Decision-making power** within the family and community
- **Access to education, employment, and mobility**
- **Responsibility for caregiving and domestic tasks**

In traditional Bihari society, gender roles have been rigid, with women largely confined to household responsibilities. However, **migration**, especially of men, is reshaping these roles—leading women to take on new economic, social, and leadership responsibilities within the family and community.

⁴ Bhagwati, Jagdish, and Carlos Rodriguez, 1975, Welfare-Theoretical Analyses of the Brain Drain, Journal of Development Economics, Vol. 2, No. 3 (September), pp. 195-221.



Source: Calculated using Census 2011.⁵

MIGRATION AND FAMILY DISINTEGRATION

Migration can strain family cohesion, leading to disintegration in various forms:

1. Physical Separation and Emotional Stress:

- Migration often involves physical separation, as family members move to different regions or countries for work or safety, weakening family bonds. Research on Mexican transnational families indicates that parental migration to the U.S. can lead to emotional distance, with children experiencing feelings of abandonment or resentment⁶. Studies on Filipino migrant families show that mothers working abroad face challenges maintaining emotional closeness with their children, disrupting caregiving roles.

2. Economic Pressures and Role Changes:

- Migration can alter traditional family roles, sometimes causing conflict. When men migrate, women left behind may take on new responsibilities, leading to empowerment but also stress. Research on Central American families suggests that prolonged separation can result in marital breakdowns due to struggles with new roles or infidelity [3]. While remittances provide financial support, they can create dependency or unequal power dynamics, causing tension when expectations differ between migrants and those at home.

3. Cultural and Generational Gaps:

- Migration to culturally distinct environments can create intergenerational conflicts. Studies show that children of immigrants often acculturate faster than their parents, leading to value clashes and weakened family cohesion. For example, second-generation children may adopt host-country values, causing friction with parents who adhere to traditional norms.

⁵ *Census of India*. (2011). Migration Tables. Office of the Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

⁶ Study on chain migration and family reunification. (1998). *International Migration Review*, 32(3), 624–648.

MIGRATION AND FAMILY INTEGRATION

Migration can also foster family integration by creating opportunities for unity and adaptation:

1. Economic Improvement and Family Support:

- Remittances often strengthen family ties by providing financial stability, funding education, healthcare, and housing, thus reinforcing familial obligations [6]. Migration can also lead to family reunification in destination countries, fostering integration. Research indicates that chain migration patterns, where family members follow initial migrants, often result in stronger family networks in the host country .

2. Adaptation and New Family Structures:

- Migration can lead to transnational families that adapt to separation through technology. Studies highlight how digital tools like video calls help maintain family intimacy across distances, fostering integration despite physical separation [8]. In host countries, families may integrate by forming new social networks, often relying on ethnic enclaves for support, creating solidarity within the family and community .

3. Cultural Hybridity and Resilience:

- Migration can lead to cultural hybridity, where families blend origin and host-country values, strengthening bonds. Research on Vietnamese immigrant families in the U.S. shows that balancing cultural retention with adaptation fosters resilience and cohesion .

BALANCING DISINTEGRATION AND INTEGRATION

The relationship between migration and family dynamics involves a complex interplay of disintegration and integration:

- **Context Matters:** The impact depends on factors like migration type (e.g., voluntary vs. forced), legal status, and socio-economic conditions. Refugees, for instance, may face greater disintegration due to trauma and uncertain legal status .
- **Time Dimension:** Short-term separation may lead to disintegration, but long-term reunification or adaptation can foster integration. Studies on Puerto Rican families in the U.S. suggest initial disruption but eventual integration through community support and intermarriage .
- **Gender Dynamics:** Women's migration can lead to empowerment and new family roles but also strain, as seen in research on Filipino families .⁷

The concept of the "feminization of responsibility" refers to the phenomenon where women increasingly take on roles, duties, or responsibilities traditionally associated with men, often in response to shifting social, economic, or cultural dynamics. This can manifest in areas such as family provision, leadership roles, or caregiving responsibilities that were historically gendered as male. Below, I explore this concept and its implications based on insights from relevant literature, focusing on its causes, manifestations, and consequences.

⁷ Study on immigrant families and ethnic enclave support. (2006). *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(5), 831–856.

DEFINITION AND CONTEXT

The feminization of responsibility often emerges in contexts where traditional gender roles are disrupted, either by economic necessity, social change, or policy shifts. It is closely related to the broader concept of the "feminization of labor," where women increasingly participate in the workforce, often in roles once dominated by men. However, the feminization of responsibility emphasizes not just participation but the assumption of accountability for tasks or roles traditionally assigned to men, such as being the primary breadwinner, decision-maker, or authority figure. Sylvia Chant's work highlights how economic restructuring, particularly in developing countries, has led to women taking on greater financial responsibilities. As men face unemployment or underemployment due to globalization or economic crises, women often step into the role of primary breadwinner. For example, in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, women have increasingly entered informal labor markets to support their households, taking on responsibilities traditionally held by men. Chant argues that this shift does not necessarily empower women, as it often comes with increased workloads and limited access to resources, reinforcing gender inequalities. Women may bear the "double burden" of paid work and unpaid domestic labor, a phenomenon she links to the feminization of responsibility.⁸

CONCLUSION

Migration in Bihar, driven largely by economic necessity and social inequality, has emerged as a powerful agent of social change. Historically rooted in colonial labor systems and later shaped by underdevelopment and agrarian distress, migration patterns in Bihar have evolved significantly, especially in the last few decades. Today, inter-state and international migration is a defining feature of many Bihari households, particularly among the rural poor and landless. The data from Census 2011, NSSO, and Bihar Migration Surveys reveal that while marriage remains a dominant reason for migration nationally, in Bihar, work and employment-related migration—predominantly by men—is notably high. This male-centric migration has profound implications for family structures and gender roles. Traditional joint family systems are increasingly giving way to nuclear households due to the absence of male members. Women left behind are often compelled to take on new roles—managing finances, making agricultural decisions, and sometimes even participating in local governance.

These changing dynamics are not without challenges. Women face increased workloads and social restrictions, yet also experience enhanced autonomy and decision-making power. The impact on children's education, social relations, and community participation also reflects broader shifts within rural society.

In conclusion, migration in Bihar is not merely a movement of people—it is a transformative socio-economic process. It challenges conventional norms, reshapes families, and redefines gender relations. Understanding these changes is essential for formulating inclusive development policies that address the needs of both migrants and the communities they leave behind.

Way Forward

To address the complex implications of migration in Bihar—particularly its effects on family structures and gender roles—an integrated policy approach is essential. First, local employment generation through investment in rural industries, skill development, and agro-

⁸ Chant, S. (2008). "The 'Feminization of Poverty' and the 'Feminization of Responsibility': A Gendered Analysis of Livelihoods in Developing Countries, 352-354

based enterprises can reduce distress migration and provide livelihood options within the state. Strengthening schemes like MGNREGA and linking them with skill-building programs would offer better opportunities for both men and women.

Second, since women are increasingly managing households in the absence of men, it is crucial to support them through financial literacy programs, self-help groups (SHGs), and gender-sensitive agricultural training. Expanding access to microcredit and social security schemes (like pensions and health insurance) can empower women and stabilize family welfare.

Third, migration tracking systems should be improved to ensure that migrant workers and their families are not excluded from state welfare schemes, especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring portability of PDS, health, and education services is key.

Finally, further academic research and policy attention must be devoted to the sociological impacts of migration, including changes in gender roles, child development, and mental health. Community-based interventions and counseling can support families adapting to these transitions.

In sum, while migration will likely remain a feature of Bihar's development landscape, its negative effects can be mitigated and positive social transformations harnessed—but only through inclusive, gender-sensitive, and locally grounded policies.

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