

## Male Seasonal Migration and Left-Behind Women: The Case of Guagusa Shekudad Woreda, Ethiopia

Zemenu Temesgen<sup>1</sup>, Getachew Senishaw<sup>2</sup> & Guday Emirie<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

*This study was aimed at analysing the consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on left-behind women in Guagusa Shekudad Woreda, Awi Zone, Amhara Region of Ethiopia. The study employed primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through a combination of qualitative-ethnographic research methods involving in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and informal conversation. The ethnographic data were thematically organised and analysed by triangulating the various data sources to maintain the reliability and validity of the study findings. The study's findings showed that husbands' seasonal labour migration has empowering effects on the left-behind wives, leading to enhanced decision-making authority and improved socio-economic standing. Furthermore, the study indicated that husbands' seasonal migration influences the customary gender based division of labour within migratory households. In this particular context, the agricultural activities performed by the wives left behind expand to include tasks typically associated with men in society. This, in turn, generates a multitude of responsibilities and stress for the wives who are left behind. Overall, the study indicates that men's seasonal labour migration has both beneficial and detrimental effects on the women they leave behind. Nevertheless, the positive outcomes of men's seasonal work surpass the negative outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Men's seasonal labour migration, left-behind women, women's empowerment, gender roles, Awi zone, Amhara region

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: MA in Social Anthropology, Bahir Dar University, Email: [zement22@gmail.com](mailto:zement22@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant professor, Department of Social Anthropology, College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Email: [getsenishaw@yahoo.com](mailto:getsenishaw@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup> Associate professor, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, Email: [gudaye343083@gmail.com](mailto:gudaye343083@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

Migration is one of the most common universal phenomena in human history (Koser, 2007). According to estimates from the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA) in 2020, there are 281 million individuals residing outside of their place of birth in the world (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). In Africa, migration in general and seasonal labour migration, in particular, plays a significant role in improving the livelihood of migrant households (Chow et al., 2023; De Haan et al., 2002). Seasonal migration occurs over a wide variety of spatial and temporal contexts and for multidimensional causes with multitude of consequences on both the source and destination communities (Ayele & Degefa, 2022; Castelli, 2018; Chow et al., 2023).

Among the common reasons for seasonal migration, landlessness, shortage of farmlands, poor productivity of farmlands, and other natural (drought, flood, and famine) and manmade (war and conflict) factors have been leading in many low-income countries (Alem, et al., 2018; Hochleithner & Exner, 2018; Wondimagegnehu & Zeleke, 2017). These pushing factors encouraged people to leave their birthplace and move to areas where they better get employment opportunities. However, this process of departing from home for a given period could create a variety of consequences for an entire society, migrants, those left-behind families, and local communities (Boccagni, 2011). For example, the host communities will face a rising cost of goods and services, a job creation burden, and growing responsibility for providing public services. On the other hand, leaving migrants could create a vacuum of duties in the source communities, potentially reducing productivity and creating loads on women left-behind in the process of migration.

Migration is arguably misunderstood as a male prodigy. However, migration is a gendered phenomenon (O'Neil et al., 2016; Rudnick, 2009). This implies that societal gendered norms and expectations shape the preference of migration patterns and experiences of men and women. There is an intrinsic relationship between gender and migration and one influences the other in a variety of ways (Lama et al., 2021). Thus, scholars in the field of migration must be taking into consideration gender when undertaking their research. In this regard, Carling and Collins (2018) argued that migration research should be gender sensitive in its whole process that is pre-migration, during migration and post migration stages. According to Carling and Collins (2018), expectations about men's and women's roles in societies have often led to distorted accounts of migration history, in which women are seen as passive and dependent in the

process of migration. Seasonal labour migration in Africa is therefore a phenomenon that is dominated by men (Adepoju, 2003). In many areas of Ethiopia, including the Guagusa Shekudad *Woreda*, the socioeconomic and cultural norms are skewed in favour of men. As a result, the participation of women in seasonal labour is minimal (Woldu & Tadesse, 2015). Instead, women take care of the household tasks, the farm, the family, and the animals, while the males actively participate in the seasonal labour migration process.

Previous studies conducted in different African countries on the consequences of men's migration on women left behind have yielded varying outcomes. For instance, Yabiku et al. (2010) in their study of "Husbands' labour migration and wives' autonomy in Mozambique 2000-2006" come up with the argument that the women whose husbands had labour migrant experience have higher levels of autonomy. Similarly, de Haas and Van Rooij (2010) in their study "Migration as emancipation? The impact of internal and international migration on the position of women left behind in rural Morocco" reveal that husband's migration decreases the workload of women as a result of increased purchasing capacity to hire labour. They noted that the extent and nature of the consequence depend on several conditions such as migration pattern, type of household, number and age of children, land and livestock holding. Démurger (2015) also notes that many factors such as who migrates and who stays behind, the duration of the migration, the number and ages of children living in the household, the family structure, and the age of the women who are left behind influence the consequences of men's seasonal migration on the women left behind.

In the context of Ethiopia, there are some studies about the livelihood consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on households. However, most of the studies undertaken so far in Ethiopia in general and in Amhara region in particular mainly focused on the causes (push and pull factors) of seasonal labour migration and economic consequences of seasonal labour migration on the household (Asfaw et al., 2010; Ayele & Degefa, 2022; Belete, 2006; Girma, 2019; Meron, 2019). To the best of our knowledge, little research has been done on the consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women in the context of Ethiopia. In other words, previous related studies focused on the migrants and lacked an in-depth investigation of the fate of women who were left behind in the process of seasonal labour migration. Against this backdrop, this study attempted to fill this gap by addressing the consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women in the study area. Furthermore, this study aimed to look into the unseen issues like

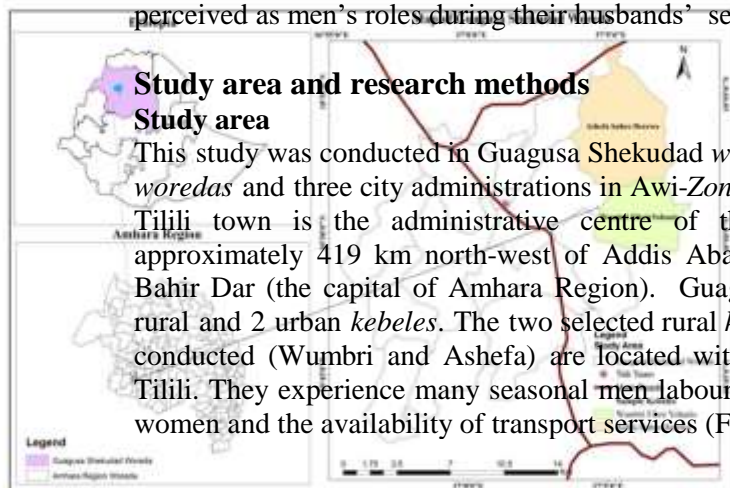
coping strategy which the left-behind women employ to accomplish activities perceived as men's roles during their husbands' seasonal migration.

## Study area and research methods

### Study area

This study was conducted in Guagusa Shekudad *woreda*, which is one of the nine *woredas* and three city administrations in Awi-Zone, Amhara Region of Ethiopia.

Tilili town is the administrative centre of the *woreda*, which is found approximately 419 km north-west of Addis Ababa and 129 km south-west of Bahir Dar (the capital of Amhara Region). Guagusa Shekudad *woreda* has 14 rural and 2 urban *kebeles*. The two selected rural *kebeles* in which this study was conducted (Wumbri and Ashefa) are located within a distance of 16 km from Tilili. They experience many seasonal men labour migrants vis-a-vis left-behind women and the availability of transport services (Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Location map of the study area (WGS coordinate system 1984)

According to the 2023 Central Statistics Agency (CSA) projection, their population is estimated to be 111,723. Out of this population, 55,178 are males and 56,545 are females (CSA population projection, 2023). The statistical evidence entails that the majority (89.22%) of the *woreda* population are rural dwellers. In other words, only (10.78 %) of the population are urban dwellers (CSA population projection, 2023). Since the majority of the population in the *woreda* lives in rural *kebeles*, agriculture is the basic economic activity of the people. The society predominantly practises a mixed farming system where the crop sub-system and the livestock sub-system are equally important.

Agroecology zone	Area/(hectares)	Temperature (°C)	Rainfall(mm)
<i>Dega</i>	9,130(30%)	10-19	2556-3572
<i>Woina Dega</i>	21,302(70%)	19-28	1540-2556

**Table 1:** Agro-ecology of Guagusa Shekudad *woreda*

**Source:** A report from Guagusa Shekudad *woreda*

### Data type and source

We use a qualitative approach to find the appropriate data for analysing the impact of men's seasonal migration on women's livelihood and participation. This is because the qualitative approach is essential to explore questions related to an individual's cognition such as perception, feelings and attitudes (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Indeed, Creswell (2014) suggested that studies on gender and migration should use qualitative methods. As a result, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD) were utilised in the area to gather first-hand information.

Participant observation was used to collect data about the participation of the left-behind women in different economic, social, and grass-root political activities in the absence of their husbands. During participant observation we hold the participant as an observer stance. In addition to participant observation, firsthand data was collected through semi-structure in-depth interviews. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 informants including women and men from both migratory and non-migratory households in Ashefa and Wumberi. From this, 21 interviews were conducted with left-behind women and seven with men returnees from seasonal labour migration. Besides, six interviews were

conducted with men and women members of non-migratory households to gain an understanding of the larger community's views on the consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women. Research informants were selected through non-probability sampling techniques: purposive and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling refers to interviewees who may be able to recommend other useful potential candidates for study (Bryman, 2016). We use snowball sampling because of difficulties of identifying who is left-behind and who is not without chain-referral or recommendation. On the other hand, purposive sampling refers to the purposeful selection of informants specifically related to the subject of the research. In addition, three FGDs composed of seven people were conducted in the area: One FGD was held at *Wumberi* and another FGD was conducted at *Ashefa* with the left-behind women. The remaining FGD was conducted with seasonal labour migrant returnees in *Wumberi kebele*.

The data from the field were organised and analysed thematically. Thematic data analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. It is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Accordingly, the collected data through different techniques was translated from Amharic into English. And then, the information collected from the field through different data collection techniques was placed under each specific objective or theme for analysis. Recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded categorically for explanation. This implies that various themes were developed to analyse the major findings of the research through triangulation of the various sources. However, the main themes of data analysis were developed in line with the specific objectives of the research.

The data collection for this study was conducted in three phases: the first phase (between September 23-30, 2019), the second phase (from December 12, 2019 to January 12, 2020), and the third phase (from July 17- 25, 2020). In the first phase, we conducted an informal interview with the *Woreda* officials and experts to gain information about the study area and select specific research *kebeles*. The second round of fieldwork took place from December 12, 2019 to January 12, 2020. The actual data of the research were collected in this round. In the first days of our arrival in the study area, we went to the *woreda* administrative office to gain permission to start the actual data collection process. The *woreda* administrator gave us permission with his best wishes and told the *woreda* communication coordinator to help us. On the next day we had a discussion with the two *kebele* administrators and they expressed their interest to

work with us. After all of these processes, we started to collect data through the data collection tools selected to collect first-hand data for the research with the help of *kebele* administrators and health extension workers in the study area.

However, this does not mean that the data collection process is without any challenge. The most common challenge we encountered was adjusting the convenient time of interview and discussion for the interviewees and FGD discussants. Adjusting a convenient time for all left-behind women was challenging. Since they were busy with different activities such as distilling of *areki* (traditional alcoholic drink local to Ethiopia), taking care of children, agricultural activities, looking after livestock and petty trade activities common in the domestic and public sphere, we were obliged to adjust a suitable time for all. The third phase of fieldwork (from July 17- 25, 2020) was intentionally conducted to observe what the left-behind women were doing in the season of men's seasonal labour migration. Because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we were not able to interview informants; we simply observed the participation of women in agricultural activities.

## **Findings of the study**

### **Seasonal labour migration as a culture**

The practice of seasonal labour migration is locally known as *Shekela*/ሽቀላ. Seasonal labour migration is an integral part of life in the study community. In the study area, seasonal labour migration is a male dominated phenomenon. It is married men who predominantly practise seasonal labour migration. When we asked our informants about the reasons behind the dominance of married men in casual seasonal wage labour migration, they linked it with the responsibilities of the migrant in the household and availability of resources. They said that in most contexts unmarried men prefer to migrate as a full-time wage labourer (*kenja*/ቀንጃ) than casual seasonal wage labour migration (*Shekela*). One of our informants in Wumberi *kebele* explained the experience of seasonal labour migration in the community as follows:

With the exception of men in a few households, men in Wumberi migrate at least once a year to different areas for labour work. For the majority of households in our peasant association, men's seasonal labour migration is considered a special strategy for livelihood diversification. Men wait for these periods of seasonal labour migration like one waits for annual festivals (Interview

with a 39 years old male farmer in Wumberi *kebele*, January 11 2020).

As shown in the above quote from one of our informants in Wumberi *kebele*, seasonal labour migration serves as a means of livelihood diversification in the study community. It also answers the question about who participates in seasonal labour migration. In this regard, during the FGD with husbands, we asked the participants to express the practices of seasonal labour migration in their community. The discussants started to talk one after another about the progressive development of the practices of men's seasonal labour migration in the following manner: Men start practising seasonal labour migration from their early ages as a migrant of cattle tender (*eregnent/አረኝነት*) in neighbouring *woredas*. Very often, they are employed by a group of farmers as cattle herders and they are paid through the contribution of the members of the group. They stay there for years by replacing their employers. Discussants stated that the cattle tenders will be employed as full-time wage labourers (*kenja*) when reaching maturity age (above 18 years old). In general terms, full-time wage labour (*kenja*) arrangement refers to the labourer hired on a contractual basis to perform agricultural activities mainly for one agricultural cropping season and the labourer earn in kind or cash based on their arrangements at the end of the year. Later, when they form their households (get married), they start participating in the casual wage labour migration process. When we asked participants of FGD whether all men seasonal labour migrants traversed these stages of life or not, they argued that not all but the majority of men seasonal labour migrants traverse through these paths of life.

## **Consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on left-behind women**

### **Changes in gender roles**

Upon men's seasonal labour migration, the left-behind women are obliged to perform agricultural and other activities in the public sphere. When we asked the left-behind female informants about changes in gender roles as a result of their husbands' seasonal labour migration, they said that in the absence of men, women become decision-makers of farming activities and perform different agricultural activities that were perceived as *men's roles* in the community. This in turn enables left-behind women to play key roles in the presence of their husbands. In the study community, men migrate seasonally after ploughing and sowing. This implies that the remaining agricultural activities such as hand



weeding, cultivation, weeding the field crops, fertiliser application, protecting field crops, harvesting, preparation of the threshing ground, transporting the sheaves to the threshing ground and threshing were expected to be performed by the left-behind women. In this context, the left-behind women use different strategies, such as *deboo*, employing a daily wage labourer, and asking support from relatives.

In this regard, one of the female informants from Wumberi *kebele* shared her experience as follows:

Nothing remains from agricultural activities except ploughing. I performed all agricultural activities such as sowing, planting, utilising manure and fertiliser, irrigation, weeding, transporting shaves, preparing the threshing ground and threshing, storage, cattle tending and milking, and sealing agricultural products (Interview with a 35 years old left-behind woman in Wumberi Kebele, December 16 2019).

The above quotation indicates the increasing levels of women's participation in agricultural activities as a result of men's seasonal labour migration. Besides, this shows the narrowing of the gaps between men's and women's roles in agricultural activities. We believed that the culture of men's seasonal labour migration through time weakens the strictness of traditional divisions of labour in the study area. For example, sowing and threshing are mainly considered as men's role in most societies, but in the case of the study area, women performed well in these agricultural activities. In this regard, Belete (2006, p. 63) reported that "... due to male out-migration and the resulting labour shortages, women have started taking over some of these tasks when faced with no other options". Women actively take part in both agricultural and livestock management. From the informant's explanations and what we observed during ethnographic fieldwork, it is possible to conclude that men's seasonal migration results in the "feminization of agricultural labour" and "feminizations of livestock production" in the study area.

In this context, De Haas and Van Rooij (2010) in their study in Morocco found that men's migration changes the gender roles of the left-behind women. They further argue that during the absence of men, women were obliged to perform traditional men agricultural roles. Likewise, Ullah (2017) in his research in the Middle East and North Africa countries (Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia) reported that men's out-migration caused changes in

traditional gender roles in all countries. Similarly, in the context of this study, men's year-to-year seasonal labour migration creates possible grounds for women to participate in agricultural and other public domain activities. As discussed earlier, women start to engage in all agricultural activities including preparing the agricultural field for storage. As a result, gender-based divisions of labour are becoming less rigid and the line between men's and women's gender roles becomes blurred in the study area. Therefore, men's seasonal labour migration has consequences on the gender roles of men and women. However, the change in the gender roles of men and women in the study community is not a full transformation.

### **Left-behind women's decision-making power**

In most patriarchal societies, women have less decision-making power than men in every sphere of life (Munemo, 2017). In such societies, men are considered as the final decision-makers in most of the household issues (Tefera, 2013; Guday & Eskinder, 2013). However, men's seasonal labour migration leads the left-behind women to become de facto heads of the household. This implies that the left-behind women become decision-makers in most household issues until their husbands return from migration. In reality, left-behind women's decision-making power upon men's seasonal labour migration differs from household to household and woman to woman.

Concerning women's empowerment in terms of decision-making power, we asked the left-behind female informants about the consequences of their husbands' seasonal labour migration on their decision-making power of the household. In this context, the majority of informants suggested the positive consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on their decision-making power.

During men's seasonal labour migration, the left-behind women participate in different social, economic, and political activities on behalf of their men. In this process, the left-behind women develop important skills, experience, and techniques of decision-making. On the other hand, few left-behind female informants perceive their temporal decision-making role during men's seasonal labour migration as a burden instead of an advantage because men sometimes migrate seasonally leaving left-behind households with nothing. Besides, men come with nothing. As one of the left-behind female informants explained "Becoming the decision-maker of the household is adding extra responsibility on my shoulders. This adds nothing for me; instead, it causes stress for me" (Interview with a left behind woman, December 16 2019).

The response of this informant demonstrates that some left-behind women hold negative perceptions towards their decision-making roles in the absence of their husbands. In rare cases, women considered the decision-making role they got during their husbands' seasonal labour migration as an additional responsibility rather than something important for them to gain experience, knowledge, and skill of decision-making.

When we examine from the perspectives of empowerment theory (Kabeer, 2005), the findings of this research partially fits with the basic argument of the theory. Empowerment theory helps to examine whether the status of left-behind women is changing for better in the social, economic and political spheres or remains unchanged in the time of men's seasonal migration. Regarding women's empowerment Kabeer (2005) identified resources, agency and achievements as the three pathways through which the processes of empowerment can occur. For Kabeer, the empowerment process can be explored through these three dimensions (Kabeer, 2005; Kulczycka, 2015). Since the finding of the study shows the enhancement of women's decision-making power (agency) in the household upon men's seasonal labour migration, we can say that men's seasonal labour migration causes women's empowerment. This implies that men's seasonal labour migration enables women to decide and act upon their own decisions. Moreover, the result of the study shows that men's seasonal labour migration enables women to develop better experiences, skills and techniques of decision-making.

### **Left-behind women's socio-economic status**

Gender and migration scholars who focus on the empowering consequences of migration argued that migration helps women to aspire better socio-economic status (Hampshire, 2006; Yabiku & Sevoyan, 2010). This is also true in the case of women who are left-behind because of their husbands' migration. During their husbands' migration, the left-behind women participate in different social and economic activities on behalf of their husbands. In this context, they said that participation in these social and economic activities in the absence of their husbands helps women to develop social networks, experiences, knowledge and skills. On the other hand, economically, in the absence of their husbands, the left-behind women actively engage in different small business activities to make money and fulfil their immediate household needs. Among the economic activities in which the left-behind women were engaged include distilling of *areqi* for sell; engaging in petty trade activities; making of different handicraft products from raw materials (e.g. bamboo, horsetail) and selling it in the local

market; participating in the local daily wage labour activities, and so on. In this context, the left-behind female informants from both peasant communities suggested that active participation in these economic activities during men's seasonal labour migration helps women to develop their financial capital and better economic well-being. Moreover, they said that it helps women to acquire new skills, knowledge, and experiences. Discussants also confirmed that men's seasonal labour migration empowers left-behind women in two ways. First, in the absence of migrant men, the left-behind women participate in different social and economic activities representing their husbands. These, in turn, allow them to build their economic well-being and develop experience, knowledge, skills, and social networks. Second, during the absence of their husbands, the left-behind women are empowered economically through remittances from their husbands.

### **Loads of responsibilities on left-behind women**

Upon men's seasonal labour migration, women who were primarily responsible for the domestic activities become accountable for activities and responsibilities such as attending local meetings, administering household finances, and managing agricultural fields that were previously performed by men (De Haas & Van Rooij, 2010; Ullah, 2017). It is obvious that when the husband migrates, the household is simply transformed into female-headed households. In line with this, the left-behind women are not able to limit themselves to their usual domestic tasks and responsibilities; rather, women are obliged to assume additional responsibilities in the public sphere. This implies that men's seasonal labour migration makes the left-behind women equally responsible for domestic and public activities at the same time. This creates loads of responsibilities on the left-behind women. This in turn relates to the fact that left-behind women are expected to spend more time in the public sphere than what they would have spent in the presence of their husband. In line with this, some left-behind female informants argued that men's seasonal migration makes women overburdened in different tasks and responsibilities both in the domestic and public spheres. In this regard, we presented the experience of one of our informants as representative of most of the left-behind women informants' ideas:

There were different activities that made me busy during my husband's seasonal labour migration because I was responsible for the whole household activities. Here in the domestic sphere, activities like preparing food, fetching water, taking care of children, looking after the livestock, performing different

agricultural activities and other activities in the public sphere makes me overburdened. Sometimes, I get confused when it comes to prioritising my daily activities (Interview with a 40 years old left-behind woman in Ashefa kebele, January 5 2019).

The explanation of the above informant shows the varieties of activities that the left-behind women performed both in the domestic and public spheres that resulted in loads of responsibilities on the left-behind women. However, this is not always the case; the workload varies from household to household. In this context, one of our informants from Ashefa *Kebele* expressed her experience as follows:

I am not new to staying alone for two or three months every year. Besides, less responsibility is added to my common work. There is not much difference in the activities I performed before and after my husband's seasonal labour migration. I mainly do what I did before. My common work is distilling homemade liquor (in Amharic *areqi*) and selling in the local market. We have no land. Sometimes we cultivate a small plot of land by renting from other farmers. It is not as time intensive. Our two children (seven and ten years old) tend the livestock turn-by-turn. So, the workload difference is not that much for me (Interview with a 38 years old left-behind woman in Ashefa kebele December 25, 2019).

The expression of this information demonstrates that the left-behind women in households with a small plot of farmlands and more productive family members do not face a problem of additional responsibilities. This is mainly because the children replaced their father's labour. From the expression of the above informant, we understand that the difference in loads of responsibilities on the left-behind women in the process of men's seasonal labour migration mainly lies in the difference in the general conditions of the household. Maharjan et al. (2012) in this regard argued that the severity and complexities of consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women depends on different conditions such as migration pattern, length of months of men away from home, type of household (nuclear or extended), livestock holding, size of agricultural farmland in which the left-behind women are expected to accomplish during the absence of their men, the number and age of household members, the comparative economic endowment level of the household and other related

factors. For instance, when the length of stay of the migrant in the destination area increases, it hardly affects left-behind women by creating loads of responsibilities and stress. In other words, the long stay of the husband does not always carry negative consequences. Besides its negative consequences, men's long stay in destination areas have positive consequences in terms of the amount of money the husband earns from wage labour.

Furthermore, as seen in the above informant's expressions, the size of the agricultural fields in which the left-behind women are expected to cultivate and manage in the absence of their husband is also directly linked with the burden of the left-behind women. This implies that when the size of agricultural fields and animals of the household increases, the burden of the left-behind women to cover all activities in the domestic and public spheres also increases. On the other hand, when women are left with small agricultural works it may reduce loads of responsibilities in the public sphere. In addition to this, the economic levels of the household (household economic endowment) may increase or reduce the consequences of men's seasonal migration on the lives of the left-behind women. This means if the husband migrates leaving the left-behind women and children with nothing, the left-behind women can experience stress and problems while meeting the household daily economic needs.

### **Men's seasonal labour migration and stress on the left-behind women**

The other consequence of men's seasonal migration on the lives of the left-behind women is stress. In this context, the left-behind female informants reported that different issues about their migrant husbands stressed and worried them. According to one of the left-behind women informants, the health condition of her husband is the one that stressed her. As discussed earlier, most of the seasonal labour destination areas have difficult environmental conditions that cause malaria, kala-azar (Visceral Leishmaniasis) and other communicable diseases. Informants said that malaria is the most common disease which could create health problems for labour migrants in most destination areas and causes stress for the left-behind women.

The other source of stress for the left-behind women was related to bandits (*shéfeta*) in the destination areas who may kill and loot their husbands. In this regard, the tension of women emanates from the bandits who may kill their husbands and take their money.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the left behind women experienced heightened stress levels as a result of additional responsibilities in both the private and public domains. Upon men's seasonal labour migration, the women

left-behind were expected to cover those responsibilities of men (heads of the household).

### **Coping strategies of left-behind women**

As discussed earlier, in the study area men's seasonal migration is guided by crop cultivation seasons in the areas of origin and destination. This implies that men's seasonal labour migration is conducted in the agricultural lean seasons in the source area and peak seasons in the destination areas. However, this does not mean that men's labour is not required in the household. Some activities require men's labour in the household during men's seasonal labour migration. In such cases, the left-behind women do not wait for the return of their husbands to accomplish these activities. Instead, they use different techniques to cover the labour of their migrant husbands. Some of the most commonly mentioned strategies employed by most of the left-behind women include labour substitution, employing daily wage labourers, and using relative's labour.

### **Asking support from kin groups**

The women who are left behind utilise the labour of their husbands' relatives to fulfil tasks traditionally associated with men in the study communities. When we asked the left-behind female informants about the situations in which they need male labour, they said that if they need to thresh *teff* for their immediate need before the return of the husband, they may use labour substitution strategy. However, the left-behind women are active participants in agricultural activities including threshing though some parts of the threshing activities are considered difficult for women. This is mainly true in the case of extended families, i.e., for the left-behind women who live around their husbands' families. The left-behind female informants argued that asking for the support of kin labour is the most important and common technique employed by the left-behind women to minimise problems associated with men's seasonal labour migration.

### ***Hoberaa/Deboo***

*Hoberaa* is a traditional labour arrangement in which the organised group of labourers work one day for one household and the next day for another. In the context of the study community, the number of labourers in one group ranges from two to five members. They argued that because of the shortage of farmland in most contexts, the working party is organised by two individuals in one group. The members of the group are mainly those individuals and households who have a close kin relation. In the context of the left-behind women, *hoberaa* seems a

labour substitution arrangement in which the left-behind women work one day for one household and in turn the left-behind women get male labour to cover the labour gap of their husbands for a specific activity.

### **Hiring daily labourer**

Another most important strategy that the left-behind women employ to minimise labour-related problems associated is employing daily wage labourers. The left-behind women would hire male daily wage labourers to fulfil tasks traditionally assigned to men. Within this specific context, informants of both studied communities contended that this technique is the least utilised by the left-behind women. Additionally, it was reported that they utilised this strategy in instances where they encountered challenges with the aforementioned two alternatives.

### **Conclusion**

In the studied rural community, seasonal labour migration is the strategy employed by households to diversify their means of livelihood. In this context, migration decisions were made at a household level through discussion and mutual consensus. In this area, seasonal labour migration was male-dominated phenomena where most men have experienced seasonal labour migration. In the process of seasonal labour migration, women were left behind to care for children, livestock and other resources in their areas of origin.

Men's seasonal labour migration carries both positive and negative consequences on the lives of the left-behind women ranging from changing the traditional gender division of labour and empowering the left-behind women regarding decision-making power and socioeconomic status to loads of responsibilities and stress on the left-behind women. In the absence of men, women decide on different household issues, and in the process, women gain knowledge, skill, and exposure to decision-making power. Besides, in the process of men's seasonal labour migration, the left-behind women gain opportunities to participate in different social and economic activities on behalf of their husbands. This enabled the left-behind women to develop their socio-economic well-being. Moreover, in the absence of their husbands, it is the left-behind women who decide on different financial issues of the household, and this helps them to gain more financial autonomy.

However, this is not always the case since in some contexts men's seasonal labour migration negatively affects left-behind women. In the absence of their husbands, the left-behind women become responsible for performing different



activities both in the domestic and public spheres. This implies that left-behind women are expected to spend more time than what they spent in the presence of their husband. This creates loads of responsibilities for left-behind women causing stress on the left-behind women. Left-behind women employed different strategies including asking for support from kins, *hoberaa*, and employing daily labourers to accomplish activities considered men's gender roles.

Moreover, the widely held view in the community is that seasonal labour migration is conceived as a major means of livelihood diversification. The majority of the population has positive perceptions towards men's seasonal labour migration. One major insight that emerged from this study is the decrease in rural-rural seasonal labour migration in recent times. The reason behind this rural-rural seasonal labour migration needs further investigation.

Moreover, the widely held view in the community is that seasonal labour migration is conceived as a major means of livelihood diversification. The majority of the population has positive perceptions towards men's seasonal labour migration. One major insight that emerged from this study is that the issue of migration is complex phenomena and beyond the case of migrants. It has differential consequences on the local community, left-behind household, destination community, left-behind children, and left-behind women. Against this backdrop, however, men's seasonal labour migration has more empowering consequences on the left-behind women.

### **Implications for future research and policy making**

From the above findings, this study has identified the following possible areas for further research. As noted earlier, most of the current gender and migration studies focus on migrant men and women. On the other hand, the issues of left-behind women did not gain due attention among scholars. Not only in academic literature but also in theoretical literature, the issue of the left-behind women was missed. This implies the requirements of future research on the subject matter to show the consequences of men's seasonal migration on the women who are left-behind in the process of migration. Since the severity and complexity of the consequences depends on different factors such as the age and sex compositions of the household, the length of stay of the migrant, the status of the migrant in the household, the size of farmlands the left-behind women expected to cultivate, the sizes of livestock, and the household economic endowment, it is difficult to think that the findings of this research are replicable in other contexts. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women.

In addition to this, men's seasonal migration has differential consequences on different household members. Since this study was conducted from the perspectives of left-behind women, it would, thus, be interesting to investigate the impacts of father's migration on the left-behind children. Similarly an extensive men's seasonal labour migration from one community can have its own impacts on the local community. It may have positive, negative, or both positive and negative impacts on the community. Thus, further research should be conducted to investigate the multi-dimensional consequences of men's seasonal migration on the local community.

On the other hand, the findings of the study provide basic information for policy makers and NGOs about the negative consequences of men's seasonal labour migration on the left-behind women. Understanding the situation of men's seasonal labour migration and its consequences on the left-behind women in a dynamic way is vital for development practitioners and policymakers to design appropriate interventions and planning efforts which could benefit women and make them major actors in the development process.

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