

Chapter 4

Navigating Lives: The Impact of Men's Gulf Migration on "Left-Behind" Women in India's Changing Landscape

Shabista Naz, PhD

Research Analyst (CRCA), Nigeria

Abstract

Indians are the largest expatriate population in Western Asia, with a diaspora of around 8.5 million people, as a result of the movement of unskilled and semi-skilled work force from India, mainly to the Gulf region. This trend, which began in the 1970s following the discovery of oil, has had a transformative effect on the social fabric of both the migrant households and their families left behind in India. Several studies have examined male migration and role of family structures in changing the lives of "left-behind" women. This chapter aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the role of socio-economic change, particularly digital advancement and technology, in shaping the agency and autonomy of the women who were left behind. By incorporating the current aspects of technological advancement, a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of these left-behind women can be achieved. Drawing on existing studies, this chapter aims to critically analyse the effects of male migration on family dynamics and to underscore the significance of technology in reshaping the lives of left-behind women. Migration patterns from across India will be examined to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this chapter will contribute to the ongoing discourse on migration

and family dynamics by emphasising the role of technology. By exploring how digital advancement has influenced the agency and autonomy of left-behind women, this research will shed light on the nuanced and complex relationship between migration, family structure changes and technology. The findings of this study have implications for policymakers, researchers and practitioners interested in understanding the multifaceted impact of migration and technology on the lives of women in transnational settings.

Keywords: Migration, left-behind women, digital advancement, autonomy, agency

Introduction

Migration has long played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of nations worldwide. In the context of India, a country with a rich and diverse history, the phenomenon of migration has evolved significantly over the decades. Historically characterised by the departure of male breadwinners seeking employment opportunities abroad, India's migration narrative is inexorably intertwined with remittances and economic sustenance. As Tumbe rightly pointed out, "India's migration story is male-dominated, and remittance yielding" (Tumbe, 2018). This chapter delves into the intricate dimensions of male Gulf migration and its reverberating impact on the women left behind in the rapidly evolving terrain of contemporary India.

Historical Context of Gulf Migration

The historical tapestry of Indian migration to the Gulf region is a narrative that has woven itself into the annals of time. During the late 19th century, the seeds of Gulf migration were sown, as Indian individuals embarked on journeys to distant lands in pursuit of economic opportunities. The initial waves of migration were modest in scale, often driven by factors such as labour shortages in the Gulf region and the economic prospects presented by the global market. The economic incentives that spurred these early pioneers to venture to the

Gulf laid the groundwork for a migration pattern that would come to define India's engagement with the world economy.

However, the momentum of this migration trend dwindled in the decades that followed, particularly during the 1930s when global economic conditions became less conducive to labour migration. Yet, these early forays into international labour markets marked the beginning of a historical connection between India and the Gulf that would prove resilient and enduring.

It was not until 1991, with the advent of economic liberalisation in India, that the embers of Gulf migration were rekindled into a blazing furnace of opportunity. The policies of economic liberalisation opened new avenues for Indian workers, particularly in the semi-skilled and skilled categories, to seek employment in the Gulf. This period witnessed a significant surge in migration to Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

Central to this resurgence was the high demand for Indian labour in the Gulf region. The willingness of Indian workers to undertake low-paid and often unskilled roles in the face of limited local workforce availability played a pivotal role in cementing their presence in the Gulf's employment landscape. As the Gulf economies prospered and expanded, Indian migrants became indispensable contributors to their growth. The following table shows the distribution of Indians in the GCC countries. According to the latest data from MEA, the UAE hosts the highest number of Indian migrants, while Bahrain hosts the lowest number among all the GCC countries.

Table 1: Distribution of Indians in the GCC countries

GCC	Population in millions (Approx)
UAE	3.55
Saudi Arabia	2.21
Kuwait	0.82
Qatar	0.80

GCC	Population in millions (Approx)
Oman	0.53
Bahrain	0.32

(Source: Ministry of External Affairs, 2023)

Changing Regional Migration Patterns

Since most of the unskilled and semi-skilled Indian workforce migrate to the GCC, they constitute approximately 70 percent of the construction industry labour force as cleaners, domestic servants and drivers (Kumar & Mehra, 2023). Rural India is the most significant provider of labour to the GCC. The question then arises: why do most Indian emigrants to the Gulf hail from rural areas rather than urban centres? This phenomenon can be attributed to several intersecting factors. Rural populations, often facing limited economic prospects domestically, are drawn to the Gulf's promise of employment and remuneration. The willingness of rural individuals to undertake low-paid and unskilled roles aligns with the labour demands of Gulf countries. Furthermore, the prevalence of rural-to-urban migration within India serves as a parallel precursor to the Gulf exodus, as individuals with rural backgrounds are already familiar with migration as a means of livelihood improvement. Geographical proximity is another contributing factor to the huge exodus of the rural workforce to the Gulf (Kumar, 2023).

The dynamics of Gulf migration within India have undergone a significant transformation over the years, reshaping the regional landscape of emigration. Historically, states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu were the dominant sources of Gulf migration, contributing substantial numbers of emigrants. However, a discernible shift has occurred in recent times, with states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal emerging as new hubs for Gulf-bound emigration (Singh & Arimbra, 2019). This transformation is indicative of a larger trend that reflects evolving economic

opportunities, changing demographics and shifting socio-economic factors within India. The following table and figure represent the changing trends in regional emigration to the GCC.

Table 2: The changing trends in regional emigration to the GCC

State	2009	2019
Uttar Pradesh	125548	86 273
Bihar	50 162	59 181
Tamil Nadu	77 665	31 588
Kerala	1.19188	14 496
Andhra Pradesh	14 023	15 528
West Bengal	21 177	28 648

Source: MEA-2020 (Number of blue-collar workers based on Passport ECR clearance)

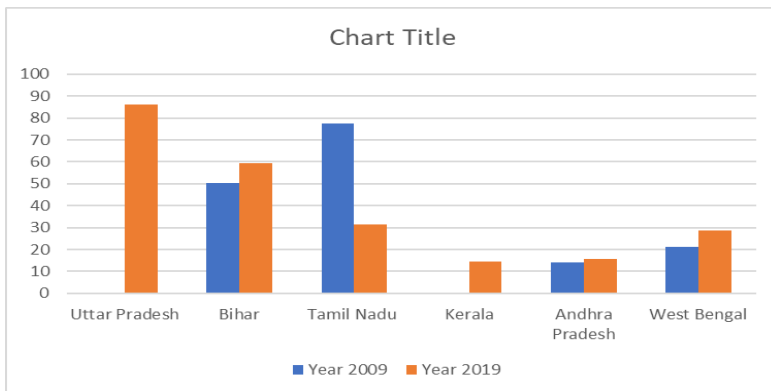


Figure 1: The numbers are in thousand. Source: MEA Data 2022

Economic Impact of Gulf Migration

Remittances have long been a critical component of India's economic landscape, contributing significantly to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Primarily sourced from the Indian diaspora employed in Gulf countries, these monetary inflows serve as a cornerstone of economic stability and growth for India. Gulf remittances are a lifeline for countless households, providing financial support for essential needs, education, healthcare and even investments in small businesses.

Remittances wield significant influence at the micro level, impacting villages, households and families. Their judicious use goes beyond ensuring food security, leading to lasting enhancements in living standards, encompassing improved access to education, healthcare and housing, ultimately elevating overall wellbeing. This multifaceted impact extends to economic, sociocultural and human development dimensions at the micro level.

In 2021, India received remittances worth \$89.4 billion, as reported by the World Bank's "Remittances Brave Global Headwinds" report (World Bank Group, 2022). However, a noteworthy shift has occurred in the sources of these remittances. Historically, five GCC countries played a dominant role, contributing 54% of the total remittances. However, this share dwindled to 28% in recent years. This decline is significant, marking a pivotal shift in India's remittance landscape (ibid).

The Reserve Bank of India's fifth round of Survey on Remittances corroborates the decline in the GCC's share of India's inward remittances. It reveals that the proportion of remittances originating from the GCC region, which exceeded 50% in 2016–17, has now declined to approximately 30% in 2020–21. This decline reflects changing economic conditions and migration patterns in the Gulf region. The following table shows the latest Gulf-sourced inbound remittances to India, in which UAE holds the first place followed by the USA.

Table 3: Country-wise Share in Inward Remittances, 2020–21

Country	Share in Total Remittance %
UAE	18.0
Saudi Arabia	5.1
Kuwait	2.4
Oman	1.6
Qatar	1.5

(Source: Ministry of Finance, 2023)

Migration from Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal to Gulf countries has witnessed a notable surge in recent years. The Ministry of External Affairs data underscores this shift, with more than 50% of approved emigration clearances for the GCC region in 2020 originating from these states. The reasons for this trend can be attributed to various factors, including job opportunities, demand for labour and socio-economic conditions in these states.

Left-Behind Women: The oft-neglected social side of migration regarding women and their coping mechanisms

The term “left behind”, commonly employed to refer to the wives of male migrants, carries a connotation of a male-centred perspective that follows the man during his migration for work (Jain & Jayaram, 2022). Left-behind women are often considered as “dependents” of the remittances, which questions the agency and autonomy of the women. Existing patriarchal norms are the major cause of the marginalised state of Indian women. Furthermore, a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, including limited economic opportunities, traditional gender roles, and conservative norms prevalent in rural communities, exacerbate the marginalization of women. This contributes to restricted access to education, limited

decision-making authority within the household, and a lack of economic independence.

While male emigration often brings economic benefits to families in their places of origin, it is essential to recognise the social costs, which are frequently overlooked. Male emigration significantly influences the physical, economic, and social aspects of the lives of left-behind women (Lei & Desai, 2021). The existing literature falls short of providing a comprehensive framework for analysing these transformations. The impact on left-behind women is multifaceted, with both positive and negative aspects.

In her seminal work, Lila Gulati explored the gendered impact of male emigration to the Gulf and its impact on left-behind women. The migration-induced absence of husbands has engendered a profound paradigm shift in the lives of women left behind. The presence of male family members abroad requires women to undertake novel roles and responsibilities, spanning both intra- and extra-household domains. These transformative changes have brought about psychological consequences, marked most notably by a sense of loneliness among wives left in their homeland. The psychological burden is compounded by the stress stemming from financial challenges and the imperative to shoulder supplementary familial roles in the absence of their husbands, thus underscoring the multifaceted impact of male emigration on these women's lives (Gulati, 1998).

These multifaceted consequences underscore the intricate web of effects engendered by male migration on the lives of these women. Such effects extend to reshaping gender roles and responsibilities, thereby reconfiguring the socio-cultural landscape within which these women navigate their daily lives (Malik, 1993).

Some research has indicated a positive impact of migration on left-behind women. Male migration fosters a positive sender perspective from abroad, driving a beneficial shift in women's roles within traditional communities. This results in increased involvement in external employment,

enhanced mobility, better healthcare access, greater participation in reproductive choices, and reduced domestic violence (Hadi, 2001).

Left-behind women have become the de facto heads of households, taking on decision-making responsibilities, managing finances, and ensuring the well-being of their families. This newfound autonomy is not merely a consequence of choice but arises out of necessity.

Education and exposure to global and trans-border norms have played pivotal roles in the transformation of traditional gender roles (Uddin, 2022). The advances in educational opportunities, coupled with exposure to global values through digital media, has led to a shift in mindset among women. They have realised the importance of acquiring skills and knowledge to navigate the challenges of life without their husbands. As a result, women have sought education and skills development opportunities, empowering themselves in the process.

The necessity of women shouldering responsibilities becomes even more pronounced when there are no other able-bodied male family members present. In such scenarios, women step into roles traditionally reserved for men, participating in income-generating activities such as farming, and even taking on leadership roles in their communities (Gulati, 1998).

However, it is essential to recognise that male-dominated migration causes psychological effects that extend beyond economic contributions. The absence of husbands and fathers due to migration can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and emotional strain among left-behind women and their families. These psychological impacts manifest as stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, influencing interpersonal dynamics within the household.

Research findings have generally indicated positive outcomes in the context of male migration on women, although the manifestation of these outcomes is contingent upon an intricate interplay of various factors within the

home country. Socioeconomic variables such as class, caste, religion and social status, alongside localised factors such as village norms and literacy rates, collectively shape the degree of women's autonomy and agency. Additionally, familial structures prevalent in society exert a significant influence, either facilitating or impeding women's empowerment in response to male migration (Hadi, 2001; Ennaji & Sadiqi, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Koirala, 2023)

Changing Family Structure and Gender Roles

Traditionally, India has been characterised by a strong emphasis on the joint family structure, where extended families lived together under a single roof, sharing resources, responsibilities and decision-making. However, this traditional model has undergone a significant evolution in response to changing socio-economic dynamics. Factors such as increased access to education, exposure to global norms, and the rise of individual income sources have contributed to a shift towards nuclear and single-family structures.

Education has emerged as a key catalyst for change, empowering individuals with knowledge and skills, enabling them to pursue opportunities beyond their immediate communities. As educational attainment levels have risen, especially among women, there has been a growing inclination towards nuclear family units. Education equips individuals with the tools to make informed decisions about their lives, including family structure and gender roles.

Globalisation, facilitated by advances in communication and technology, has further reshaped family structures and gender roles. Trans-border communication plays a pivotal role in connecting Indian families with their loved ones working abroad. This increased connectivity has fostered a more positive sender perspective from abroad, where women left behind often gain greater autonomy, engage in external employment, access better healthcare and participate more actively in reproductive choices. This shift has paved the way

for a more inclusive and balanced approach to gender roles within traditional communities.

Complex Nature of Impact

The impact of male migration on left-behind women is not a monolithic narrative but a complex tapestry woven with diverse threads. Studies exploring this phenomenon have yielded a spectrum of findings, often revealing contradictions and variations. While some women have experienced increased autonomy and empowerment in the absence of their husbands, others have faced challenges and vulnerabilities.

Regional variations play a significant role in shaping these diverse experiences. Women's encounters with migration-related changes depend on their geographical location, caste and socio-economic status. For instance, in regions with high emigration rates like Kerala, women left behind have often taken on leadership roles and enjoyed greater autonomy. In contrast, in other regions like Uttarakhand or Jharkhand, the outcomes have been less favourable (Roy, 2011), with women assuming increased responsibilities but lacking decision-making power.

Although less frequently discussed, the regional aspect of gender norms is also crucial in the impact and outcome of left-behind women's lives after male emigration from the household. Throughout India, the experiences of women left behind following male emigration exhibit notable variations, largely contingent on the prevailing status and societal roles attributed to women within specific regions. In regions such as Kerala, characterised by high emigration rates, a significant proportion of women have effectively assumed the role of household leaders. This newfound position has afforded them greater autonomy in decision-making processes, yielding more favourable overall outcomes for their families (Jain, 2020).

In contrast, within an Uttarakhand village, women left behind find themselves in a distinctly different situation.

They do not exert control over any tangible assets but bear the responsibility of managing household chores, childcare, farming and animal husbandry. While they hold relatively more influence within the household, their participation in village meetings remains comparatively limited.

A starkly different scenario emerges in the villages of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, where women are the most severely impacted by male emigration. In this context, they shoulder the entirety of the workload, yet find themselves bereft of decision-making authority. Consequently, they are compelled to rely on male members of the extended family, which does not add to their social status and autonomy (Roy, 2011; Neha, 2022).

In examining the autonomy of women left behind in the context of male emigration, it becomes evident that household dynamics undergo substantial reconfiguration in response to the absence of male family members.

Among upper-class women residing within joint family systems, dependence on male household members tends to be more pronounced. In contrast, lower-class women, residing in nuclear family settings, assume pivotal roles in decision-making processes, resulting in heightened autonomy and agency (Uddin, 2022). A study by Sonalde and Banerji in 2008 unveiled a nuanced narrative of women's agency and autonomy predicated on class and family structure. Left-behind women cite the example of Bihar, where they would often find themselves accompanied by elderly women or male members of the household, thereby altering the nature of their autonomy. Nearly 34% of women cohabiting with their husbands had older female family members in the household. This proportion significantly increased to 56% among women whose husbands were migrant labourers (Desai & Banerji, 2008).

The interplay of class and caste in India also significantly shapes the agency and autonomy of women left behind. For instance, upper-caste Hindu women tend to have a lower likelihood of living independently compared to their

lower-caste Dalit counterparts. This divergence in living arrangements results in varying degrees of autonomy and increased work responsibilities, particularly for Dalit women.

The intricate relationship between women's autonomy and societal norms further complicates the assessment of impact. While migration has, in some cases, led to the empowerment of women, the deeply ingrained norms and expectations within Indian society can act as both enablers and barriers. Women may gain autonomy out of necessity, but societal norms may still limit the extent of their decision-making power. This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between personal agency and the wider cultural context.

Digital Advancement and Changing Landscape: Agency, Autonomy, Decision-Making

Advancements in digital technology have ushered in a new era, reshaping the landscape of migration patterns and communication channels between migrants and their families. The advent of smartphones, widespread internet access and social media platforms has facilitated real-time, borderless connectivity. This has significantly altered the dynamics of migration, enabling migrants to stay closely connected with their loved ones despite geographical distances.

One of the most notable implications of these digital advancements is the transformation of migration patterns. Migrants are no longer isolated from their families during their journeys. They can maintain constant contact, providing reassurance and support to their families back home. Digital communication has even influenced decisions regarding migration destinations, as migrants seek locations with better connectivity to stay connected with their families.

Left-behind women have emerged as beneficiaries of this digital revolution. The increased autonomy and agency afforded by digital technology are noteworthy. Women now have access to a wealth of information and resources at their

fingertips. They can independently seek information on a wide range of topics, from healthcare to financial management. This access to information empowers them to make informed decisions for themselves and their families.

Furthermore, digital platforms have opened up new avenues for income generation and skill development. Left-behind women can participate in remote work opportunities, online education and e-commerce ventures. This economic empowerment not only enhances their financial independence but also elevates their social status within their communities.

The ability to access social media and online communities provides left-behind women with a support network beyond their immediate surroundings. They connect with others facing similar challenges, share experiences and seek advice. This virtual sisterhood fosters a sense of solidarity and resilience, bolstering their overall well-being.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the digital divide remains a challenge. While advancements in digital technology have brought about positive changes, not all left-behind women have equal access to these resources. Disparities in access to smartphones, internet connectivity and digital literacy persist, particularly in rural and marginalised communities.

The concept of the “digital divide” has gained significant attention, and there are now active efforts being made to reduce it. The development of the mobile phone, which stands out as being more affordable than other technical mediums, appears to be making a significant contribution to the closing of this gap. Mobile phone access is becoming a more important component of measures used to close this gap (Garg, 2021).

An interesting finding from an empirical study of a Chinese village is that the presence of migrant spouses is positively correlated with increased household decision-making autonomy among women who are left behind, which helps to reduce gender-based power disparities in homes. The study also emphasises the critical role played by left-behind women’s use of mobile phones, notably in enhancing their

influence in household decision-making processes. These observations highlight the complex relationships between gender, migration and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use, highlighting the potential for ICT interventions to promote gender equality in situations where male spouse mobility is a factor (Zheng & Lu, 2021).

Within the Indian context, the discourse on the impact of ICT on women's agency and autonomy reflects a multifaceted landscape. While a predominant body of research suggests positive outcomes, it is important to recognise that contradictory viewpoints exist. These perspectives draw attention to the potential challenges and negative consequences that can emerge for left-behind women through ICT adoption.

In their research, Masika and Bailur (2015) found that the adoption of ICT by women is frequently closely related to their ideas of how such technologies could either challenge or support pre-existing gender norms. Taking notes from rural India, they emphasised the notions of “adaptive preference” and a “patriarchal bargain” to explain why women choose to embrace or reject ICT. Adaptive preferences denote the phenomenon wherein individuals, without explicit awareness, alter their inclinations in response to unattainable circumstances. This involves an automatic adjustment of one's aspirations, manifesting as a subconscious downgrading of preferences when faced with inaccessible choices (Elster, 1985).

The concept of “patriarchal bargain”, as outlined by Kandiyoti, involves women employing strategic approaches within specific limitations. These limitations are characterised by an overly rigid perception of male dominance, which must be dismantled to comprehend the intricate dynamics of gender relationships shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Kandiyoti, 1988).

In the course of their research, Masika and Bailur (2015) gathered responses from individuals exemplifying the negotiation of life through the paradigms of Adaptive

Preferences and Patriarchal Bargains. One respondent, emphasising the concept of maximising options, articulated, “Here in Bangalore, I am more free. I can do what I want”. This expression highlights the expansion of freedom facilitated by the acquisition of ICT skills and through marriage, strategically undertaken to enhance autonomy within the socio-cultural context.

Another respondent stated, “If my brother did not come, I would not be able to come. My parents see so many boys here, and it is not normal for boys and girls to mix together freely”. These narratives shed light on how individuals strategically shape their choices within the constraints of societal norms, offering insights into the nuanced interplay of gender dynamics within the context of Adaptive Preferences and Patriarchal Bargains in India.

This dual exploration of adaptive preferences and patriarchal bargains, as evidenced by these responses, enhances the understanding of how women in India negotiate their lives amidst the complex interplay of cultural norms, adaptive strategies, and aspirations for expanded freedom within diverse societal frameworks (Masika & Bailur, 2015).

In the pursuit of comprehending the influence of ICT and digital progress on the agency of “left-behind” women, a fundamental prerequisite is the comprehensive examination of their engagement with digital devices. Notably, among the spectrum of digital devices, the mobile phone emerges as a salient instrument, characterised by its exceptional usability and accessibility to women. Therefore, the pivotal role played by mobile phones in shaping the digital interactions and empowerment of these women becomes a subject of particular interest and significance.

Mobile phone penetration among rural women, characterised by the convergence of gender inequities and illiteracy, is a critical component in the effort to understand the ramifications of digital advances. It is critical to have a thorough awareness of both the scope and justification for their use of mobile phones. In order to obtain insight into the

multidimensional function of digital advances in their lives, it is critical to explore the methods through which women in such situations acquire and deploy this technology, as well as the underlying reasons that drive their usage patterns.

Intriguing research by Garg (2021) into rural, illiterate women in India showed a surprising pattern, with almost 85% of the population showing usage of mobile phones, without necessarily owning the device themselves. Surprisingly, they began using their mobile phones as their main and fastest source of communication and information gathering. This finding highlights the cell phone's potential as a tool for technology rural development projects. This little portable gadget has almost universal accessibility among women in rural regions, a group who are frequently in charge of taking care of the family's daily needs, including those related to health and education (Garg, 2021). Left-behind India women use mobile phones more for organising their lives and maintaining relationships.

Women predominantly employed the mobile phone as a means to sustain communication with their familial networks, encompassing both immediate and extended relations, a discernment consonant with prior research findings. As elucidated by Macueve et al. (2009), the fortification of familial bonds and support structures emerges as a consistent outcome resulting from the routine use of mobile phones by women, irrespective of geographical distances. This empirical evidence underscores the enduring significance of the mobile phone as a tool for nurturing and preserving familial connections, aligning with the scholarly discourse on the subject. The findings reaffirm the pivotal role of mobile communication in engendering and sustaining familial linkages within contemporary sociotechnical contexts.

The mobile phone emerges as a tool empowering women to make informed decisions, not only in their caregiving roles but also across various domains of significant decision-making. Notably, the phenomenon of male emigration has compelled many women to shoulder

multifaceted responsibilities, encompassing both domestic and external facets, including matters pertaining to household management, health, education and financial affairs. Within this context, the mobile phone assumes a salient role, facilitating access to information and resources essential for well-informed decision-making, thereby bolstering women's agency. This dynamic underscores the transformative influence of mobile technology in equipping women with the capabilities required to navigate the complexities of their expanded roles, transcending traditional boundaries and augmenting their capacity to engage in critical decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted repercussions stemming from male emigration to the Gulf on left-behind women in India. The analysis has illuminated various dimensions of this phenomenon, encompassing economic contributions, shifting family structures, evolving gender roles, the empowerment facilitated by digital advancements, and the inherent complexities involved in assessing these outcomes.

Key findings underscore the transformative role of male Gulf migration, manifesting in substantial economic contributions to India's GDP and regional disparities in remittance distribution. Additionally, the chapter has elucidated the evolution of family structures, where women increasingly bear responsibilities and experience heightened autonomy. Notably, digital advancements have emerged as a catalyst for empowerment, amplifying women's access to information, and informed decision-making.

To comprehensively address the challenges and opportunities encountered by left-behind women, future research should delve deeper into regional variations and the intricate interplay between societal norms and women's agency. Furthermore, policymakers are urged to consider targeted interventions aimed at bridging the digital divide,

thereby ensuring equitable technology access and fostering gender equality within society.

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Diaspora in the MENA Region and Beyond

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Diaspora in the MENA Region and Beyond

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