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## Return Migration and Reintegration: An Analysis of International Female Domestic Workers from Kerala

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### **Abstract:**

*Return migration is an important aspect in the migration of females. The current status of return migrants, the impact of return migration on the individual and their family and the future plans of return migrants are issues, which need to be explored. The present paper, based on primary data collected from six villages in Kerala, focuses upon return migration and reintegration of female domestic workers who migrated internationally. The analysis reveals that the major reason for return was related to health. While a substantial proportion had returned because of unfavourable conditions they had to face abroad such as non-payment of salary, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, some others had returned because of other familial reasons. About three-fourths of the female migrants had faced financial stringency after return and some of them faced some kind of tensions in the family because of their return. A large proportion of them wanted to migrate in the future. The intention of future movement was comparatively higher among females who had financial as well as other familial problems after their return.*

**Keywords:** Return migration, female domestic workers, current status, future plans

### **1. Introduction**

The feminization of migration is a prominent reality in recent times although it is less explored. A large number of migrants today are females, traveling beyond the borders of their countries to escape from poverty or to improve the socio-economic conditions of their families. Roughly half of the migrants in the world are females (IOM 2000). While men constitute majority of the international migrants in Asia, there is an ever increasing number of female migrants in the region (Fawcett *et al.* 1984, Arya and Roy 2006, UNFPA 2006, United Nations 2006, Agrawal 2006). Asia is one of the world's greatest suppliers of female international migrants in various regions especially in the Middle East and Europe (Hugo 1999). However, most of studies of migration have focused on male migrants or head of households on the assumption that females migrate mainly with their families (Simmons *et al.* 1977). Therefore, the causes and consequences of female migration are perceived as those of their spouses and families.

Return migration is another important aspect in the female migration. Return migration to the place of origin is an inevitable consequence of international migration (Zachariah *et al.* 1999). Return migration has serious implication on the socio-economic changes in the place of origin, especially in the rural areas. The most important problem of return migrants is their readjustment in the place of origin after return. There are a number of factors, which can affect the return migration. Female migrants may have to face difficult situation after their return. Some of the females who were successful in migration may not face many problems after return while some others who had returned without completing the contract and without having much savings might face more problems. Thus, the reasons of return migration and the status of return migrants are greatly associated. The current status of return female migrants, the impact of return migration on the individual and their family and the future plans among return migrants are issues, which need to be explored.

In India, a fair percentage of the migrants originate from the state of Kerala (Nambiar 1995). Compared to any other states in India, Kerala is ahead in terms of social and health indicators with higher levels of literacy, life expectancy, and lower levels of infant and child mortality. But, Kerala is backward in terms of economic development and industrialization. This has resulted in acute unemployment among youth in Kerala. Therefore, a large section of the youth migrates to other states and countries for employment. A significant section of them includes females who migrate to other parts of India as well as outside India in search of the employment opportunities.

Many studies have been conducted in Kerala on characteristics of migrants, the impact of remittances on the migrant's household as well as on the regional economy (Mathew and Nair 1978, Prakash 1978, Cheriyan 1990, Sekher 1997, Zachariah *et al.* 2003).

But, only few studies focused on some of the issues of return migration in Kerala (Sekher 1997, Nambiar 1998, Zachariah et al. 2006) and the main focuses of these studies are on male migration. The current status of female return migrants and whether the returnees have been reintegrated with the economy at the place of origin are issues, which have been studied less in the context of migration from Kerala. Hence, it is important to look into the impact of return migration of females on the migrant and their family and their future plans. In this context, the present paper focuses on the return migration of international female domestic workers and their reintegration at the place of origin.

## 2. Data and Methodology

This paper is based on primary data collected from six villages of Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. The studies conducted by Zachariah et al. (1999) and Zachariah et al. (2003), based on a sample of 10,000 households selected at random from all the districts and all the taluks of Kerala show that Thiruvananthapuram, which is the southernmost district in Kerala, was one of the major centers of migrants and return migrants. The study by Nambiar (1995) further shows that female migrant workers mainly originate from southern districts of Kerala. As recently conducted studies show that Thiruvananthapuram district has relatively high proportion of female migrants, Thiruvananthapuram district has been selected for the present study. Females, who migrated out of Kerala in the past, without family for employment purpose but have returned to Kerala and were members of the household at the time of the survey, are considered as return migrants. Only those females who had spent at least six months at the place of destination and who have returned within five years prior to the survey were considered for the study. Females who had returned from countries outside India were classified as international migrants.

The villages in Thiruvananthapuram district were divided into three strata based on female work participation rate and from each stratum, two villages were selected randomly. From each selected village, three wards were selected randomly in order to get approximately 1000 households in each village. The identification of female migrants was done by a complete house listing of 5787 households in all the selected wards. The 27,692 persons enumerated in six villages of the study area were living in 5787, households. There were 13,832 males and 13,860 females in the households. A total of 2205 migrants (1406 current migrants and 799 return migrants) were found in these households. Out of these, 413 were female migrants (254 current migrants and 159 return migrants) and of these there were 300 female migrants (179 current migrants and 121 return migrants) who had migrated for work related reasons. Out of these, there were 146 current migrants and 116 return migrants whose duration of stay was more than six months. Also, out of the 116 return migrants, there were only 96 migrants who had returned five years preceding the survey. Among the 242 migrants (146 current migrants and 96 return migrants) who satisfied the eligibility criteria of the study, 12 refused and 18 respondents were not available in the household even after three visits. Eventually, the study included 212 female labour migrants out of which 120 were current migrants and 92 were return migrants. Of the 92 return migrants, there were only 76 international migrants who had migrated for domestic work. The present paper is based only on return female migrants who had migrated internationally for domestic work (Table 1).

Both quantitative as well as qualitative techniques were used for data collection. Semi-structured interview schedule was used for quantitative data collection and in-depth interviews were carried out for qualitative data collection.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Profile of Return Female Migrants

The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the female labour migrants are presented in Table 2. It is evident from the table that majority of the return migrants was in the age group 30-45 years. More than one fourth of the return migrants (26.3 per cent) were in the age group 45 years and above. About 41 percent of the return migrants were aged less than 30 years at the time of their first migration. With regard to marital status, more than 70 per cent of the return migrants were currently married. The proportion of never married migrants at the time of first migration was around nine per cent and it has been decreased to 2.6 per cent after return. Also, the proportion of return migrants who were either divorced or separated was comparatively less before migration.

With regard to educational status, about one fifth of the return migrants were illiterates. The 2001 census results also reveals that in Thiruvananthapuram district, around 15.5 per cent of the females in the rural areas was illiterates. As regard to religion, more than half of the migrants were Christians. The proportion of Muslims (35.5 per cent) was much higher as compared to Hindus (9.2 per cent). More than 90 per cent of the migrants belong to other backward caste category. Nearly 90 per cent of the migrants reported their first place of destination as gulf countries. The other places reported are London, Singapore, and Canada.

### 3.2. Reasons for return of female migrants

In order to capture the causes of return migration, return migrants were asked to list the important reasons that made them to come back. The return migrants reported multiple reasons for their return, which can be classified into factors related to the working place and factors related to the place of origin. Table 3 presents the distribution of return international migrants according the reasons for their return. The major reasons for the return of the migrants were health related reasons and lower level of job satisfaction. Nearly one fifth of the migrants had reported these factors as the reasons for their return. About 15 per cent reported the reasons as non-payment of salary, expiry of contracts and verbal, physical and sexual abuse. In addition, there were also a few cases of repatriation of females for their illegal stay (8 percent). For some of the migrants, the reasons for return were related to their family (8 percent).

More than one tenth of the migrants had returned for their children's education and future. While about five of them came back for getting married another eight had returned because of family responsibilities. The other reasons reported include family members asked to come back, did not return after holidays, to take care of family members, family responsibilities etc.

### 3.3. Arrangement of money for return journey

Sometimes, female migrants especially domestic workers may return without completing their contract because of the harsh working conditions in the employer's house. In those cases the employer may not provide money for travel and other expenses. Table 4 shows the distribution of return migrants by the arrangement of money for their return. Nearly 68 per cent of the return migrants received the cost of traveling from their employer for their return. Out of those who received travel cost from their employer, about three fourth of the migrant's employer provided full expenditure and the remaining got partial expenditure for their travel. Sometimes there was experience of cheating by the employer at the time of return also.

A return migrant (aged 53 years, divorced and illiterate) who worked as domestic worker reported:

*"While returning, the employer had given me a ticket and said that I can go up to hometown with that ticket. Later on, at the airport I came to know that the ticket was only up to Mumbai. I was not having any money at the time of return. After reaching Mumbai, some of my co-passengers had given me money for getting train ticket up to Thiruvananthapuram."*

### 3.4. Status of female migrants after return

If female migrants are not able to ensure financial stability during their migration period, the status after their return might get affected. As the female migrants were involved in domestic work at the destination, majority of them were not in a favourable situation after return because they could not amass sufficient money for sustains themselves and their families. As Table 5 illustrates, about 87 per cent of the migrants faced some kind of financial stringency after their return. However, about 40 per cent of the migrants had reported that they received some kind of financial help from their family members and relatives.

In addition to financial problems, a sizable proportion of the returnees had faced some kind of problems and tension in the family because of their return. This was reported by close to one fourth of the return migrants. Migrants reported different type of problems after their return. For instance, five of the returnees have reported that they had borrowed a huge amount for their migration and could not repay the amount before return. This had made their family members unhappy with their return. Some of the returnees reported that they used to send remittances to their relatives when they were at the destination and the absence of income after return made some of the relatives unhappy. In few of the cases, family members used to compare them with other ladies in the village who were successful in their migration. A woman reported that her mother used to verbally abuse her as she returned without completing the contract.

Another return migrant (aged 42 years, currently married and primary educated) reported:

*"When I was working abroad, I used to have lot of money and used to have more freedom in taking decisions in the family. But after return, my husband beats me after drinking alcohol and says that I have left the job and came back without any savings"*

### 3.5. Work status of female migrants after return

Table 6 provides information on distribution of return migrants according to their status of work after return. Nearly three fourth of the return migrants were not working at the time of the survey. However, a study by Zachariach et al (2006) conducted in Kerala found that about three fourths of the return international migrants were gainfully employed after their return. A vast majority of the return migrants in that study was males and that may be the reason for this contradictory result. Another important observation was that while before migration only about half of them were not working, after return the number has increased to about three fourth.

Of the return migrants who were working, about one fourth of them was engaged in domestic work, and others were involved in selling fish, working in coir industry, working as sales girl and vegetable sellers. The maximum earnings of majority of the return migrants were up to Rs.2000. About 44 per cent of the migrants who were working have reported that their income was much less as compared to that of place of destination. It was interesting to notice that although the earnings after return was significantly less compared to the situation at the destination, all the return migrants who were working were happy with their current job. Moreover, about 57 per cent reported that the present job is better than that of the destination. More than one fourth of the return migrants who were not working have reported that they tried to get a job after their return but did not succeed in getting job (table not shown).

### 3.6. Intention of future migration

In order to get clear perception about tendency of future migration, the return migrants were asked about their intended future movements. They were also asked to report the reasons for their intention of future migration. Nearly 62 per cent of the migrants wanted to migrate if they get a chance to migrate again and about four per cent of them reported that they have not yet decided whether to migrate again (Table 7). Among those who wanted to migrate again, ten of them reported the economic reasons as reasons for their intention of future migration while about 60 per cent of them reported the reason as financial problems. The other major reasons reported include building a new house, arranging marriage of daughter, education of the children, and desire for a good future for the family. The main reason reported by those who do not want to migrate again was health problems. This was reported by around one fourth of the migrants who were not willing to migrate again. A small proportion of them reported that their migration had affected their children's education and therefore they do not want to migrate again (table not shown).

Nearly, 40 percent of the return migrants had tried to migrate again but could not succeed. While about four of them reported loss of passport as the reason for not being successful in migration, the reasons for another two were that they were medically unfit for

migration. Another four of the returnees wanted to migrate again, but their family members did not allow them to migrate, while another two were cheated by the agents. The other reasons reported were age got over and lack of money for migration. However, five of the returnees were already under the process of migrating again (table not shown). Migrants who wanted to move again or who were under the process of going again was reluctant to give information as they fear that giving information about their previous destination would affect their future movement. This is evident from the words of a return migrant (aged 40 years, currently married, illiterate and worked as a domestic worker at the destination). Her feelings are given in the following lines:

*"I have already given money to the agent for migrating again and it is under process. If I give you information about the previous destination and if the sponsor comes to know about all those things I won't be able to migrate again".*

The distribution of return migrants according to their future intention of movement by selected characteristics are presented in Table 8. Table indicates that there was considerable variation in migrant's desire for another migration according to their background characteristics, working conditions at the last place of destination and the situation after return. The analysis by age groups shows that those who are less than 45 years old have the highest intention of future movement. The percentage who wanted to migrate again was slightly higher among females who were currently married. The future intention of movement of female returnees varied by educational status as well. While about three fourth of the illiterates wanted to migrate again, the corresponding percentage among those who were educated up to upper primary and above was only 52 per cent.

As regards to the place of last destination of the returnees, it was found that the future intention to move was comparatively higher among migrants whose last place of destination was gulf countries. The proportion of the migrants who wanted to migrate again was slightly higher among those who moved more than once and returned as compared to those who had migrated only once. There was slight variation in the desire to migrate according to the problems faced at the last place of destination. For instance, the proportion of returnees who wanted to migrate again was relatively higher among those who did not face any discrimination at the last place of destination. Similarly, there was considerable variation in the future intention to move by the situation after return. Whereas about 64 per cent of the migrants who faced financial problems after return wanted to migrate again, the corresponding percentage for those who did not face any financial problems after return was 50 per cent. Further, there was slight variation in the proportion of migrants who wanted to migrate again according to the problems faced in the family. Although the variation was not significant, qualitative analysis indicated that there is an association between current situation and future intention to move. For instance, a return migrant (aged 50 years, separated, educated up to primary) who worked as domestic worker and had migrated four times to Gulf countries reported:

*"I have migrated many times to Gulf countries for work. Except one move, all other moves were not successful for me. I have taken a huge amount from money lender for last migration and could not repay it till now. He has filed a case against me. If I get a chance to migrate, I want to go again for repaying my debts"*

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Female migrants are nearly exclusively found in the service sector, domestic work, caregiver work, and entertainment work. Majority of the Asian women migrating to the Middle East are domestic workers (UNFPA 2006). Despite the fact that domestic workers are indispensable in middle and upper class homes, the value of their work is not adequately recognized while the law ensures them very limited protection (Hamid 2006). The present paper focuses on the return migration of female domestic workers, their adjustment at the place of origin after return and their future plans.

The analysis indicates that a vast majority of the female domestic workers had migrated to gulf countries. Majority of the migrants were young, Christians and less educated. Return migration was under compulsion for some of the females because of their illegal stay, expiry of work contracts, lower level of job satisfaction, health related problems and familial problems. Hence, both the factors at the place of destination and individual factors played a major role in the return of female migrants. The findings by Zachariah *et al.* (2001) also found that migrants return because of the difficult working and living conditions at the destination. However, the studies by Sekher (1997), Nambiar (1998) and Zachariah *et al.* (2006), conducted among return migrants focused mainly on males, found that the major reason for return of migrants was expiry of contract. Females may return due to familial reasons like providing care for family members, education of children and arranging marriage of the family members. The present study also shows familial reasons like family responsibilities, children's education, taking care of the health of family members as some of the significant factors affecting the return of female migrants. This indicates that the reasons of return migration of females may be different from that of males.

Return migrants got benefits as well as disadvantages from their return. Female migrants had faced differing situations after their return such as financial problems and other tensions in the family. A vast majority of the migrants had experienced some financial problems after their return. In addition to financial problems, some of the migrants had faced some kind of tensions in the family because of their return. As regard to the work status after return, about three fourth of the migrants were not working at the time of survey. Others were involved in domestic work, fish sale, coir industry and vegetable selling. Majority of them were receiving a maximum of Rs.2000 as their monthly salary. The study by Boere, (2010) also found that return migrants find employment, but frequently in a low paid job or with insufficient working hours.

Return migrants often try to migrate again due to several reasons (Nair, 1986). The reasons can be financial problems, problem in adjustment after return, and other family tensions (Tannenbaum 2007). The present study also shows that a significant proportion of the return migrants want to migrate again. The proportion who wanted to migrate again was relatively higher among females who were young, illiterate, who were not currently married, and whose last place of destination was Gulf countries. Furthermore, the intention of future movement was found to be higher among females who had faced some kind of financial problems as well as other problems in the family because of their return. In some cases, return migrants want to migrate again not necessarily for

financial benefits but due to the other problems in the family because of their return. The study by Rahman (2001) also revealed that women who face lot of problems during migration and return often make multiple moves due to various reasons. At times, they migrate due to their failure in the previous migration, and which had created more financial problems in the family. In some other cases, the success of the previous migration may induce women to migrate in search of job.

In India, the migrants were one of the important groups who have got little attention by the government supports and policies or official recognition of their importance. However, Government of Kerala made more initiatives in the reintegration of the return migrants compared to other states in India (Jabir, 2014). The present study revealed that health related reasons are one of the major reasons for return of female domestic workers. Therefore, female migrants should be encouraged to take health insurance before their migration. Majority of the female return migrants faced lot of problems in reintegration at the place of origin. Hence, a gender sensitive re-integration programme should be established for return migrants to improve their economic and social life after return. For example, family rehabilitation programmes may be implemented for return female migrants, their husbands, children and other members of their family.

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<b>Selection of female migrants for the study</b>	<b>Current Migrants</b>	<b>Return migrants</b>
Total female migrants identified by household survey	254	159
Female migrated for work related reasons	179	121
Duration more than six months	146	116
Recently returned (five years preceding the survey)	NA	96
Not at home	14	4
Refused	12	0
total interviewed	120	92
International female domestic workers		76
Number of household listed	5787	
Males	13832	
Females	13860	
total Population	27692	

*Table 1: Sample Selection  
Note: (1) NA- Not applicable*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Return migrants</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
Less than 30	6	7.9
30-45	50	65.8
45 years and above	20	26.3
<b>Age at the time of first migration (in years)</b>		
Less than 30	31	40.8
30-45	42	55.3
45 years and above	3	3.9
<b>Current marital status</b>		
Never married	2	2.6
Currently married	54	71.1
Widowed	10	13.2
Divorced/ separated	10	13.2
<b>Marital status at the time of first migration</b>		
Never married	7	9.2
Currently married	50	65.8
Widowed	11	14.5
Divorced/ separated	8	10.5
<b>Educational status</b>		
Illiterate	15	19.7
Literate, primary not completed	17	22.4
Primary	21	27.6
Upper primary up to secondary	21	27.6
Secondary passed and above	2	2.6
<b>Religion</b>		
Hindu	7	9.2
Muslim	27	35.5
Christian	42	55.3
<b>Caste</b>		
SC	4	5.3

OBC	70	92.1
Others	2	2.6
<b>First place of destination</b>		
Gulf countries	71	93.4
Other places	5	6.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Female Migrants

Reasons for return	Number	Percentage
<b>Destination factors</b>		
Contract over	12	15.8
Illegal stay abroad, compulsory repatriation	6	7.9
Lower level of job satisfaction	15	19.7
Non-payment of salary	11	14.5
Less salary	6	7.9
Verbal and physical abuse/sexual abuse	12	15.8
<b>Individual factors</b>		
Health related reasons	15	19.7
Personal and family reasons	6	7.9
To get married	4	5.3
Family responsibilities	6	7.9
For children's future/education	9	11.8
Others	27	35.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	

Table 3: Distribution of return migrants according to the reasons for return

Note: (1) Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

Arrangement of money for return	Number	percentage
<b>Whether employer provided the cost of travel</b>		
Yes	52	68.4
No	24	31.6
<b>Travel cost provided by the employer*</b>		
Full expenditure	38	73.1
Partial expenditure	14	26.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	

Table 4: Distribution of return migrants by the arrangement of money for return

Note: (1) \* for 52 cases who received cost of travel from employer

Problems faced	Number	percentage
<b>Experienced financial stringency after return</b>		
Yes	66	86.8
No	10	13.2
<b>Got financial help from family members/relatives*</b>		
Yes	26	40.0
No	40	60.0
<b>Faced problems in the family because of return</b>		
Yes	19	25.0
No	57	75.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5: Distribution of return migrants by problems faced in the family after return  
 Note: (1) \*for 66 cases who experienced any financial stringency after return

Work status	Number	Percentage
<b>Work status after return</b>		
Working	21	27.6
Not working	55	72.4
<b>Type of work*</b>		
Domestic work	5	23.8
Others	16	76.2
<b>Income (in Rs)*</b>		
Up to 2000	17	81
More than 2000	4	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 6: Distribution of return migrants by status of work after return  
 Note: (1) \* for 21 migrants who were working after return

Intention of future movement	Number	Percentage
<b>Willingness to migrate again</b>		
Willing to go	47	61.8
Not willing	26	34.2
Not decided	3	3.9
<b>Tried to migrate again</b>		
Yes	30	39.5
No	46	60.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 7: Intention of future movement among return migrants



Characteristics	Want to move	Don't want to move	Total
<b>Age</b>			
Upto 45 years	66.1	33.9	56
More than 45 years	50.0	50.0	20
<b>Marital status</b>			
Currently married	63.0	37.0	54
Others	59.1	40.9	22
<b>Educational status</b>			
Illiterate	73.3	26.7	15
Upto primary	63.2	36.8	38
Upper primary and above	52.2	47.8	23
<b>Place of last destination</b>			
Gulf countries	63.4	36.6	71
Other places	40.0	60	5
<b>Order of move</b>			
Moved once	60.9	39.1	46
More than once	63.3	36.7	30
<b>Faced discrimination at the last destination</b>			
Yes	61.1	38.9	18
No	62.1	37.9	58
<b>Faced exploitation at the last destination</b>			
Yes	64.5	35.5	31
No	60.0	40	45
<b>Faced physical/verbal abuse at the last destination</b>			
Yes	65.4	34.6	26
No	60.0	40.0	50
<b>Faced sexual exploitation at the last destination</b>			
Yes	57.1	42.9	7
No	62.3	37.7	69
<b>Experience of financial problem after return</b>			
Yes	63.6	36.4	66
No	50.0	50.0	10
<b>Problem in family because of return</b>			
Yes	68.4	31.6	19
No	59.6	40.4	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.8</b>	<b>38.2</b>	<b>76</b>

Table 8: Distribution of return migrants according to their intention of future movement by selected characteristics

Note:  $\chi^2$  was found to be insignificant