

Male Migration and the Lebanese

Family: Impact on the Wife Left

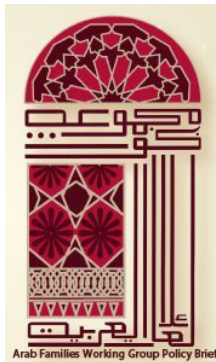
Behind

An Arab Families Working Group Policy Brief

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Summary



A recent study supported by the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) examined a micro aspect of Lebanese migration, namely the emigration of the head of the household (the husband) and its impact on the wife left behind. The study attempted to illuminate any basic changes created in the household by the husband's emigration, namely on decision-making and well-being within the family, essentially on the wife left behind.

Methodology

The study analyzed the findings of data collected from a sample of households in which the husband migrated to work abroad. These households were selected from a national survey covering 18, 243 households conducted by Saint Joseph University in Beirut in 2001. Although 310 households met the required criteria – having the head of the family work abroad – the sample was limited to 50 households located in Beirut proper, 40 in small villages and towns surrounding it, and 17 in rural localities. This decision was based on the fact that the balance of eligible households were scattered across the country and difficult to reach.

A questionnaire was used in interviews with the wives who were left behind. Interview questions focused on the following issues: the family profile; the family income; the decision-making process prior to and after the husband's migration; the impact of the husband's migration on the wife's well-being, and the problems she faced during his absence.

Despite the fact that the analysis of the data can shed some light on the issues raised, these findings should not be extrapolated. The figures presented herein describe the status within the small chosen sample. Therefore, this study should be seen as exploratory and will require in-depth follow-up to assure sound correlations, conclusions, and recommendations.

Findings

1) Family Profile

Little variation is observed in the family structure across the various regions included in the survey. Almost 40% of households are made up of 4 to 5 residents, while those with 7 residents or more represent 12.6% of the total. The Lebanese family is mostly nuclear, consisting of the head of the household, the spouse (husband/wife) and the children. The educational level of the migrant husbands is relatively high, with only 2 illiterates among them, and 41% holding a university degree.

In all cases but one, the husband's decision to migrate was economic in nature. The most common reason mentioned was finding a higher-paying job abroad, followed by not finding an appropriate job in Lebanon or becoming unemployed. In 64 cases (59.8%) the decision regarding migration was taken by the husband alone.

2) Family Income

Over 75% of the families studied had a monthly income between \$1,000 and \$3,333. While there are no reliable statistics on income distribution in Lebanon, these income levels are high by Lebanese standards, as the minimum monthly salary in Lebanon, at the time the survey was undertaken, was \$200. In 2007, gross national income per capita at purchasing power parity (GNI per capita, PPP) was \$10,040.

Remittances were sent by all migrants to their families who stayed behind, either on a regular basis or sporadically. In most cases (83.2%), these remittances represented between 75% and 100% of the monthly family income. 70.1% of these remittances were sent directly to the wife.

It is worth noting here that, when asked whether they considered the husband's remittances to be adequate to cover family expenses, 39.6% of respondents stated that it was more than enough, 29.7% considered it sufficient, and 30.7% thought it was insufficient. In this last case, this insufficiency did not seem to encourage wives to join the labor market, since four of those respondents whose husband earn less than \$1,000 per month do not work, nor do 31 of the 37 whose husband's monthly salary varies between \$1,000 and \$2,000, confirming once more the traditional involvement of the wife essentially in the private sphere.

Of the 85 wives who were not working at the time of the survey, when asked why they

did not work, 32 (37.6%) answered, “because of the children;” 23 (27.1%) replied, “it is my husband’s wish;” and 18 (21.2%) indicated their desire to “focus only on running my household.” The responsibility of home-making is still considered by them and by society at large to be primarily theirs, while their husbands are still viewed as the breadwinners.

3) The Decision-Making Process Prior to and Following the Husband’s Migration

Using the profiles of the households surveyed as a background, four independent variables were selected to examine the impact of the husband’s migration on the wife’s involvement in the decision-making process. These are: 1) The husband’s income; 2) The husband’s level of education; 3) The wife’s level of education; 4) The length of the husband’s absence. The rationale for the choice of these variables is linked to how they affect the division of roles within the family and lead to women’s involvement outside the household.

The husband’s income level does not seem to be an important variable when it comes to managing family expenditures following his migration. In fact, the majority of respondents in all income brackets reported that they have been in charge of doing so. Remittances sent by the husband are also largely managed by the wife at home. 74.8% of respondents noted that they managed the money sent home by their husbands.

As the husband’s income level has not been a variable with regard to family expenditures, neither has management of property owned in Lebanon been changed following his migration. Whereas women still oversee the family expenses, the sphere of property management remains the husband’s domain; he makes decisions regarding this matter during his visits home or via contacts with his male children or relatives.

Managing family expenses and remittances becomes the wife’s task following the husband’s migration in the majority of cases, and this irrespective of his level of education. The latter does not seem also to affect decisions regarding family property, as well as decisions related to children’s marriage and employment which remain the prerogative of the husband.

Findings of this study do not indicate a relationship between a wife’s level of education and her management of family expenses and remittances. As in the case of the preceding variables, the wife’s level of education does not alter the making of decisions related to the children, where the wife is the major decision maker regarding their education, and the husband regarding their marriage and employment.

The biggest variable affecting a change in the family’s decision-making was that of the length of the husband’s absence.

The time element seems to have empowered women by having control over their own income and contributing to decisions regarding their children’s employment and marriage.

4) Impact of the Husband’s Migration on the Well-Being of the Wife and Family

The wife left behind has obviously become more empowered following the migration of her husband. How has this empowerment affected her well-being? The respondent’s attitudes regarding his absence could serve as relevant indicators in answering this

question.

When asked about the reason for not migrating with their husbands, 46 women (43%) mentioned that they preferred their current living situation. 44 (41%) said that they could not join their husbands because of their children's schooling. Furthermore, 64.5% of respondents said that they felt more independent during their husband's absence. However, more than three-fourths of the respondents (77.6%) acknowledged that the husband's absence either caused problems, or aggravated existing ones. In fact, more than half of the wives said that they would be happier if their husbands came back for good, emphasizing that the burden and responsibilities of children and family would decrease if he did. In addition, they complain about the restricted social life they had, since their husband's departure. It was not clear, however, if they were willing to trade their newly acquired rights for his return.

Conclusion

Given the small size of the sample, predicting trends based on this survey alone is not advised. A more in-depth analysis is required to draw results that are more conclusive. Nonetheless, we can venture to say that the husband's migration has made the wife left behind assume new roles outside the domestic domain that is traditionally hers. As our study indicates, after his departure, she performs tasks that he is expected to perform when he is present. As a result, she becomes more involved in the decision-making process and in the public sphere. However, one cannot but wonder how the distribution of roles in the family has affected her own well-being and her leisure time.