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# Double Burden or Newfound Freedom?

## Women's Empowerment amid Large-Scale Male Labor Migration from Rural Tajikistan

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## ABSTRACT

Labor migration is generally motivated by the prospect of higher earnings abroad, and many migrants support their left-behind household members through remittances. Migrants' long-term absence from home may, however, also affect intra-household dynamics among those remaining behind. Relying on primary qualitative data as well as quantitative data from 938 married women, we analyze empowerment impacts of migration on women in rural southern Tajikistan. Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. A large share of young men migrates internationally, leaving behind – and often supporting – a multi-generational household. Yet, strong social norms limit the decision-making power and mobility of women, particularly of young women. Whereas senior women report noticeable differences when their spouses migrate, this is far less so for young women who live with their parents-in-law. Our study demonstrates that accounting for a respondent's position within the household is key to understanding empowerment outcomes of its members.



**Keywords**: migration, gender, empowerment, mixed-methods, multi-generational households, Central Asia

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## INTRODUCTION

Labor migration is often the outcome of a decision made jointly by migrants and non-migrants, taking into account economic and social conditions and aspirations of both those considering to migrate as well as those expecting to stay behind (Stark & Bloom 1985). Motivated by the prospect of higher earnings abroad, many migrants pledge to support their household members and relatives staying behind through remittances during their absence; and with savings from their migration earnings upon their return. Yet, resources acquired through migration are unlikely to be shared equally by those staying behind, even among those residing in the same household. Moreover, the physical long-term absence of migrants from their home could alter intra-household dynamics and co-residence choices of those staying behind (Bertoli & Murard 2020). This can influence residents' agency and wellbeing in aspects other than material benefits or the human and social capital obtained through remittances.

A growing body of literature on the impact of migration on the empowerment of women staying behind demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of impact pathways and impact areas. Yet, evidence is often inconclusive. Migration can positively affect women's economic empowerment if remittances increase household or private economic resources that women can access or control. Moreover, the physical absence of a spouse or other household member can increase women's decision-making power and agency with respect to personal, household, and community-level decisions. At the same time, the physical absence of a household member may either increase or decrease time, emotional, and cognitive burdens. Migration impacts will undoubtedly be contingent on the development context in which they take place (de Haas & Van Rooij 2010). Importantly, the effects of migration on those staying behind may also differ across and within households, depending on the household structure and an individual's position therein (Giles & Mu 2024; West et al. 2024).

Using quantitative and qualitative data from rural households in the southwest of Tajikistan, we revisit whether and how women's empowerment changes when a male household member migrates. Since the secession from the Soviet Union, households in Tajikistan and throughout Central Asia have increasingly relied on remittances to sustain and improve their livelihoods. Today, Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world: Remittances were a staggering 49.9 percent of the country's GDP in 2022 (World Bank 2025). Migrants are predominantly young men, leaving behind – and often supporting – an extended household (Shimizutani & Yamada 2023). The vast extent of male labor migration leads to a disproportionally low share of young men in rural areas and households, which may necessitate women to take responsibility for tasks that would otherwise be performed by men. Nevertheless, the population adheres to strong gender and social norms emphasizing patriarchy, patrilocality, and intergenerational intra-household hierarchies (Turaeva & Becker 2022). Thus, the expected impacts on empowerment outcomes of women staying behind may be attenuated by strong social norms and the extensive prevalence of co-residence patterns.

Our paper contributes to the literature on gender and migration in three different ways. First, the mixed-method analysis of quantitative data from 938 married women in combination with an analysis of qualitative research data from 12 focus group discussions and 12 individual interviews offers a unique opportunity to generate rich insights across all domains of Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework. Naila Kabeer (1999) emphasizes resources, agency, and wellbeing as three interrelated dimensions of empowerment. Bound by the availability of certain data or indicators, and what is feasible or relevant in the specific study context and scope, studies focusing on the empowerment effects of migration often capture a narrower set of empowerment domains. In doing so, they might miss out on key insights on how men's migration and women's empowerment are related.

Second, our study reinforces a growing literature advocating to consider the critical role of non-spousal co-residents when analyzing intra-household outcomes (Quisumbing 2025). Both quantitative and qualitative scholars have already provided evidence of the critical role of patrilocal residence patterns and the determining role of mothers-in-law on selected aspects of women's empowerment and wellbeing (e.g. Turaeva & Becker 2022 in Tajikistan; Khalil & Mookerjee 2019 in South Asia; or Gram et al. 2018 in Nepal), or the importance of household structure therein (e.g. Spierings 2014; Debnath 2015; West et al. 2024). Yet, too many studies – even those focusing on specific gender-differentiated outcomes – continue to turn a blind eye towards respondents' intra-household position and their relationship to the migrant (Gram et al. 2018; Quisumbing 2025). This is particularly relevant for migration studies, given that migration often takes place in communities with extended family residence patterns, and also affects – and generally encourages – co-residence choices of those staying behind (Bertoli & Murard 2020).

Third, we bring evidence from an understudied country, Tajikistan, and by extension an understudied region – Central Asia. Despite its high remittance-dependence and strong gender and social norms, the region features prominently neither in gender studies nor in migration studies. Beyond quantitatively assessing labor impacts, to our knowledge, only Slavchevska et al. (2021) use quantitative data to assess migration impacts on a broader set of empowerment outcomes among women in Tajikistan, relying on the abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI). They suggest that women in migrant households have higher levels of empowerment. Yet, their sample includes only a limited share of junior interviewees (i.e. young women residing with their parents-in-law), thus likely mainly reflecting the experiences of senior women and women in nuclear households. To date, studies focusing on gendered outcomes of migration in Central Asia, particularly those applying quantitative research methods but also some qualitative studies, have ignored this intersection between gender and generation.

## MIGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF LEFT-BEHIND WOMEN

The seminal work of Naila Kabeer (1999 p. 435) describes empowerment as "*the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability."* Key to this conceptualization of empowerment is the emphasis on change, i.e. "*the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them*" (Kabeer 1999 p. 437). There are three interrelated dimensions that are key to empowerment: resources, agency, and well-being outcomes. *Resources* are key to exercising choice, given that without resources there are often insufficient means to exercise meaningful choice. *Agency* is the "ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer 1999 p. 438). Finally, *wellbeing outcomes*, also referred to as achievements, include tangible and intangible outcomes of empowerment. The increased access to resources or increased agency should result in higher wellbeing and allow individuals to achieve "valued ways of being and doing" (Kabeer 1999 p. 438). This conceptualization of empowerment forms a useful framework to comprehensively study the impact of men's migration on the empowerment of women staying behind.

*Resources.* Increasing household resources is a key driver of labor migration. Labor migrants may provide immediate support to their relatives staying behind by sending cash or in-kind remittances, or they may acquire savings to take back to their relatives at the end of the migration episode. Remittance-receiving households have been found to experience positive impacts on consumption expenditures (Mondal & Khanam 2018), thus reducing poverty (Rozelle et al. 1999; Taylor et al. 2003; Adams & Page 2005) and improving food security (e.g. Mora-Rivera & Van Gameren 2021). In doing so, labor migration is instrumental in increasing current or future material, human, and social resources of those who stay behind.

Yet not all household members who stay behind can make claims to these resources, and their benefits may not be distributed equally among all members. In households with multiple adults, only few adults might have access to and decide how to use the remittances. Others may neither have direct access to the cash or goods received nor have any say in how to use them (Lenoel 2017). Moreover, migrants might send home remittances for specific predetermined purposes, or remittances might only suffice to fund a bare minimum of essential expenditures. This can impede the recipient from exercising choice over these resources received.

Migration can also pose the risk of reducing household resources. Not all labor migrants are successful in acquiring migrant work nor are they all able or willing to send remittances back home. Thus, some households might experience a drop in household income or resources after a member departs for migration – a "negative lost-labor effect" (Giles & Mu 2024).

*Agency.* The long-term absence of a household member may temporarily or permanently lead to changes in decision-making power and other forms of agency among household members who stay behind. When a male household member migrates, female members might need to assume his responsibilities related to household management and representation. This could offer opportunities for women to engage in strategic household- and community-level decisions that they were previously less involved in (Lenoel 2017). Moreover, the migrant's physical absence limits his ability to directly supervise members' whereabouts and actions, thus also potentially increasing women's individual freedoms – e.g. in terms of mobility or employment (Doss et al. 2022). Anticipating benefits and drawbacks associated with their husbands' or sons' migration, women are often active agents in determining household migration strategies (Kawarazuka et al. 2022; Doss et al. 2022).

The abovementioned increases in women's agency might not necessarily materialize, especially in patrilocal settings, where women live in or near the homes of their in-laws (West et al. 2024). Traditionally, senior family members – either male or female – exert significant power over younger family members. In line with patriarchal values and expectations, senior family members might take over the migrant's responsibilities and extend support to, but also surveil, his spouse (Lenoel 2017; Rosy & Nejati 2021). Women in extended households might even face a deterioration in agency or wellbeing where their husbands would otherwise have advocated on their behalf (Lenoel 2017). Moreover, widespread access to mobile phones allows migrants to be in frequent contact with their relatives at home. This gives them the opportunity to weigh in on strategic decisions (Lenoel 2017; Doss et al. 2022).

*Wellbeing outcomes*. If migrants send remittances home, the wellbeing of those who stay behind is often directly, and positively, affected due to increased access to resources. For example, remittances have been shown to improve dietary intake (Rana et al. 2025) and health outcomes of those left behind (Azzarri & Zezza 2011; Carletto et al. 2011). Likewise, it is well known that remittances are often used to improve housing conditions (Osili 2004; Adams & Cuecuecha 2010; Lenoel 2017; de Brauw & Giles 2018).

The social status of left-behind family members might also change due to the migration of a household member. This could be directly related to changes in material wealth of the household itself, but also to the investment of resources in "social capital" or to the social meaning of remittances to those receiving them. In Central Asia, for example, remittances are key to funding important ritual events such as weddings, circumcision ceremonies, or other life-cycle celebrations (Reeves 2012; Zotova & Cohen 2016). These events, though sometimes considered as conspicuous consumption, are key to maintaining social relations and status (ibid.). Finally, household members may also experience changes in social status due to them taking on new roles and responsibilities in their households and

communities, such as proving themselves to be successful farmers or entrepreneurs (Najjar et al. 2022).

Yet, the wellbeing of family members staying behind may also be adversely affected by migration. One often-mentioned concern relates to workload. As mentioned earlier, women might have to take on tasks and responsibilities that are otherwise performed by their spouse or son, either related to the reproductive or productive sphere. In some settings, this leads to excessive time burdens and stress for women staying behind. For example, in rural China, women in migrant households were found to be doing more farm work than would have otherwise been the case (Mu & van de Walle, 2011). In rural India, Pattnaik et al. (2017) argue that women's growing contributions to agricultural production add to the already heavy work burden of most rural women, thereby further undermining their wellbeing.

Wives with migrant husbands might also experience stress from added responsibilities – beyond the impact on their time allocation. In Morocco, for example, de Haas and Van Rooij (2010) find that women experience discomfort or shame when performing non-traditional roles and responsibilities (De Haas & Van Rooij 2010). In many cases, they also experience loneliness in the absence of their spouse (ibid.). The absence of a male adult in the home might also increase concerns over safety (de Haas & Van Rooij 2010).

## LABOR MIGRATION AND GENDER IN TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan is a mountainous landlocked country in Central Asia, bordering with Afghanistan in the south, Uzbekistan to the west, Kyrgyzstan to the north, and China to the east. In 2023, it was estimated to have a population of 10.4 million people, with 72 percent of the population living in rural areas (World Bank 2025). Following the secession from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country suffered from a Civil War from 1992 to 1997 (Atkin 1997), leaving it in a state of absolute poverty. Despite great progress in reducing poverty since the early 2000s, the country remains the poorest of all countries in Central Asia (World Bank 2024).

Remittances have been key to poverty reduction in Tajikistan (Gang et al. 2018). International labor migration has formed a key lifeline for Tajik households ever since its independence and is likely to remain indispensable for the near future. The lack of local employment opportunities pushes individuals to seek work abroad. Attracted by significantly higher wages and the availability of unskilled jobs, young and middle-aged men from rural areas primarily migrate to Russia (ADB 2016; Najjar et al. 2022; Shimizutani & Yamada 2023). Outmigration from rural areas has been shown to increase in response to abnormal weather (Takeshima et al. 2025). Remittances positively affect household expenditures, including non-food and education expenditures (Yamada et al. 2022; Takeshima et al. 2025), and are correlated with greater food security (Ghimire et al. 2023; Takeshima et al. 2025).

Beyond impacts on household food security, poverty, and expenditures, quantitative studies assessing the impact of migration on family members staying behind have mainly focused on the education of children and labor supply of adult household members. Jaupart (2018) finds that boys living in migrant households are less likely to lag behind at school and work less. Left-behind teenage girls, however, do not experience a positive impact on education, undertake a higher number of domestic chores, and marry earlier. Gatskova et al. (2019) show that the net effect of migration on girls' schooling turns from positive to negative with girls' age, concluding that migration can be detrimental to women's empowerment.

The effect on the labor supply of left-behind adult family members has been studied by various authors, but their findings are inconclusive. Murakami et al. (2021) find that having a migrant household member or receiving remittances reduces labor supply of the household members staying behind. Vadean et al. (2019)'s analyses confirm that remittances decrease the probability of wage employment among men staying behind, but they do find an increase in small-scale self-employment among this group. In contrast, Kan & Aytimur (2019) find that having a migrant household member has no significant effect on the number of hours that men and women work. However, they have suggestive evidence that having a migrant reduces work hours of the men staying behind among wealthier households; and that it increases unpaid family work of the women staying behind. Finally, Ghimire et al. (2023) write that migration is associated with larger demands on women's time and labor.

After state independence from the Soviet Union, Tajikistan has faced a revival of religious and traditional norms, including with respect to gender roles (Gatskova & Kozlov 2019). Although the constitution provides men and women with equal rights, the interweaving of local and Islamic customs and traditions assigns all authority and power to men (Mukhamedova & Wegerich 2018). Men are expected to be the breadwinners, household heads, and main decision-makers. Household chores fall mainly to women, particularly tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and elderly care (Mukhamedova & Wegerich 2018). Women's mobility is restricted, and young women are largely confined to their homes. Men, in contrast, take responsibility for outward-facing tasks such as purchasing food and non-food items at the market (Pechtl et al. 2024).

Tajik households often host multiple generations and follow patrilocal settlement patterns (Meurs & Giddings 2012; Turaeva & Becker 2022). Despite the high share of male outmigration, there are relatively few female-adult-only households in rural areas (Meurs & Slavchevska 2014). Young couples typically reside with the husband's parents during childbearing age and wives of male migrants remain hosted with their parents-in-law (Meurs & Giddings 2012; Meurs & Slavchevska 2014). Within these households there is a strict hierarchy whereby senior women's decision-making power is relatively large compared to younger women in the home (Meurs & Giddings 2012; Rosy & Nejati 2021; Turaeva & Becker 2022; Pechtl et al. 2024). Generally, more senior women take responsibility in managing the household and will delegate specific tasks to the junior women in the home. Preparing and serving meals, for example, is typically the task of a daughter-in-law or daughter (Pechtl et al. 2024). When a junior woman's husband migrates, she may have minimal to no opportunities to make claims to the remittances sent home (Rosy & Nejati 2021; Gatskova & Kozlov 2019). Moreover, mothers-in-law take decisions regarding their daughters-in-law's mobility in the absence of the latter's spouse (Rosy & Nejati 2021). Young household members typically avoid arguments and signs of disobedience, which are considered shameful behavior (Rosy & Nejati 2021). Young women living with their parents-in-law also often endure emotional abuse (Turaeva & Becker 2022).

## DATA AND METHODS

### Qualitative data and analysis

Qualitative data was collected in October 2023 in four districts in Khatlon Region (Khuroson, Vakhsh, Balkhi, and Shahrituz) (Figure 1). The selection of these four districts involved clustering the twelve districts from the quantitative dataset (described below) into four groups based on socio-economic and geographical characteristics, and a random selection of one district among each of the four clusters. Subsequently, in each selected district, three jamoats[1] were randomly selected from the list

[1] A jamoat is a third-level administrative division in Tajikistan beyond the district and regional level, and is further subdivided into villages.

of all jamoats in that district. In total, twelve focus group discussions (three per district) and twelve individual interviews (three per district) were conducted.

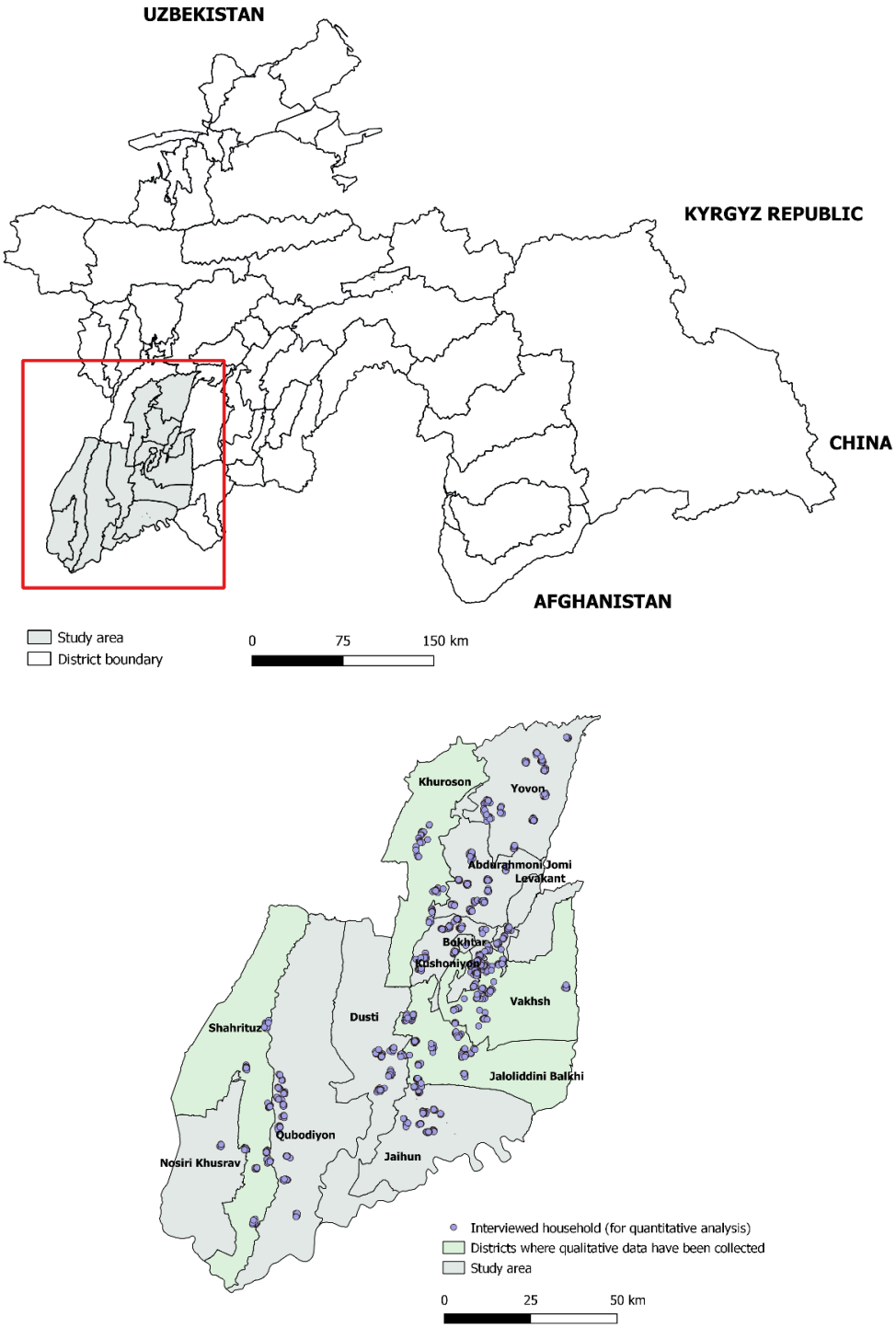


**Figure 1. Study area**
Source: Authors

Three types of respondents were selected for these groups and individual interviews: men who had migrated at least once during the past five years, women whose husbands had migrated at least once in the past five years, and women whose sons had migrated at least once in the past five years. In cases where both a husband and a son had migrated, the respondent was assigned to one of the two

categories and answered questions solely about that category. At most one person per household was allowed to participate in the group discussions, to improve respondent comfort in answering questions and to increase potential variation in household experiences in our sample. Appendix tables A.1 and A.2 show key characteristics of the study participants.

The interviews were conducted in Tajik by one female local moderator using a semi-structured interview guide. Two of the authors attended the interviews – though with minimal interference as requested by the moderator –, acting as note-takers and asking clarifying questions at the end of the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining participants' consent. Interviews inquired about key household demographics of the respondents, migration of household members, remittances, perceived advantages and disadvantages of migration, other income sources, and intra-household decision making. Interview transcripts were translated from Tajik into English.

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clark (2006, 2019). Transcripts were coded systematically in NVivo 15. Themes were developed inductively from the codes and further derived deductively based on the literature describing migration and key gender and intra-household norms in similar settings. Subsequently, the themes were linked to the three dimensions described by Kabeer (1999).

*Researcher characteristics and reflexivity*

The moderator is a 35-year-old Tajik woman with around ten years of experience in moderating qualitative research. She possesses a degree in medicine and is fluent in both Tajik and Russian. While mainly having resided in various regions in Tajikistan, she also lived in Russia for part of her adult life – an experience relevant to the study topic. The interviews were attended by two junior researchers (MM and CT). MM is a 24-year-old Tajik woman with a bachelor's degree in economics and prior experience in conducting field interviews. CT is a 23-year-old female foreign national from Belgium, completing her master's degree in bioscience engineering at the time of data collection. She relied on translation by MM to understand the content of the discussions. This collaborative arrangement aimed to enhance the integrity and comprehensiveness of the qualitative data collected during the interviews and support the authors' data immersion. Having a female-only team conduct the interviews was deemed critical to ensure comfort for female respondents and was not found to create discomfort for male interviewees. MM conducted the reflexive thematic analysis of the data, with the themes discussed and finalized with the co-authors. ILB is a Belgian woman with a PhD in agricultural economics with several years of research experience in Tajikistan and prior extensive research experience in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. SP is a 27-year-old Austrian-American woman with a master's degree in public health and has conducted mixed-method research in Khatlon Province.

## Quantitative data and analysis

The quantitative data was obtained through an in-person survey conducted with 2,000 households in twelve districts of Khatlon Province in February-March 2023 (Figure 1). The sample was designed to be representative of those twelve districts, and sought to interview households previously interviewed in 2015 (IFPRI 2024). Households from the 2015 sample that could not be interviewed in 2023 were replaced by the nearest neighbors. We however do not include the 2015 dataset for the analyses in this paper due to differences in the sampling of individual respondents (see below) and differences across survey instruments.

The survey consisted of a household-level and individual-level section, the latter containing modules on empowerment. After completion of the household-level questionnaire, the CAPI program randomly selected one male and one female adult household member of the ages 18 to 54 years old as the suggested respondents for the individual-level questionnaire. The interviewer could, however, deviate

from this selection in case the suggested respondent could not be interviewed. This approach aimed at mitigating the risk of insufficient variation among respondents, with respect to their ages, marital status, and their role in the household. Despite difficulties in adhering to these suggestions[2], this approach did result in variation among respondents. We have an almost equal number of women with a junior role in the household (i.e. women living with their parents or parents-in-law) as the number of women with a senior role (i.e. women living without their parents or parents-in-law) who responded to the empowerment modules.

To examine women's wellbeing during spousal migration, we focus on a subsample of married female respondents for our main analyses. The main sample for the analyses in this paper therefore consists of 938 female respondents. For descriptive statistics, where possible, both population-level (i.e. full survey sample and using household survey weights) and sample-level descriptive statistics (i.e. sample of households or respondents included in the main regression analyses) are presented.

We employ regression models to understand the association between international migration of a male household member ($Migrant_i$) and a range of individual outcomes ($Y_i$), as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Migrant_i + \beta_2 Migrant_i * Senior_i + \beta_3 Senior_i + X'_i \beta + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

We focus on seven different outcome variables $Y_i$ : whether the respondent feels she has input in decisions on minor expenditures; whether she feels she has input in decisions on major expenditures; whether she has input in decisions on crop income; whether she leaves her home at least once per month to visit an urban center, market, relatives, friends, or neighbors; agency (see Appendix A.3); time satisfaction (on a scale between 1 and 10); and whether she sometimes feel overwhelmed by a multitude of tasks. The regression model depends on the outcome variable and is either an ordered probit, probit, or ordinary least squares regression model. Error terms are clustered at the village-level.

Analyses were run for two different control variables for migration. The main analyses in the paper consider whether the respondent's spouse is currently migrating for work. In appendix, we will also show analyses where we rely instead on a more general variable that indicates whether there is a male household member who is currently migrating for work. The analyses account for the respondents' position in the household by including the interaction term for migration with $Senior_i$ . Furthermore, the analyses control for other respondent and household characteristics that are commonly expected to be associated with empowerment outcomes ($X'_i$), such as whether the respondent's son is migrating (among those sons considered a household member), the age and education level of the respondent, number of children below the age of two of the respondents, and the number of male and female adults in the household.

There are several shortcomings with respect to the quantitative analysis. First, there is likely some noise in our estimates of the extent of migration. Our sampling approach, focusing on households residing in the study area, misses out on households that have moved in their entirety (i.e. where there are no left-behind household members in Tajikistan). It's also possible that households underreport labor migration, especially if they intend to conceal a member avoiding military service. Moreover, recall data about migration might also suffer from underreporting (either due to recall bias or respondent fatigue). These are potential sources of underestimation of migration. However, the extent of labor migration might also be overestimated if households continue to report the migration of a person who has established their own household in Tajikistan.

[2] There was large attrition when transitioning from the modules of the main household survey to the individual questionnaires, a very low response rate for male respondents generally (likely also due to their absence from the home), and household members other than the one randomly selected wanting to act as respondent.

Ideally, we would like to measure the causal effects of migration rather than associations. Our analyses cannot expose causal relationships, due to the potentially endogenous relation between migration and the outcome indicators of interest. Although some studies attempt to instrument for migration, there may be limited plausible instruments for migration in a setting where there is such chronic and widespread reliance on migration. As argued by many others, migration is undoubtedly an endogenous decision – often made jointly by migrants and non-migrants. This may similarly apply to co-residence patterns (Bertoli & Murard 2020), which are also critical determinants of different members' empowerment. Indeed, using household panel data from Tajikistan, Gatskova & Kozlov (2019) find that current migration is associated with an increase in household size, whereas an earlier migration episode completed at least two years prior to the interview was associated with household members moving out.

### Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from IFPRI's Institutional Review Board (DSGD-23-0105 for quantitative data collection, and DSG-23-09398 for qualitative data collection) and was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Participants provided verbal informed consent prior to being interviewed.

## RESULTS

### Qualitative results

Four main themes emerged with respect to the association between men's migration and women's empowerment and wellbeing: (i) Remittances, (ii) Mobility and decision-making, (iii) Workload, and (iv) Intra-household relationships. Below, we align them with the three interrelated components described by Kabeer (1999): resources, agency, and wellbeing.

#### *Theme I: Remittances (RESOURCES)*

Migration is mainly driven by the need for income to maintain and enhance rural households' quality of life. Respondents emphasized the lack of well-paid local employment opportunities, necessitating them to consider migration as an alternative. Migrant workers – mostly in Russia – earn significantly higher income abroad as compared to home. Family members who stay behind often rely on remittances to cover daily necessities. Moreover, remittances are key to financing major investments that are essential for young people to establish married life. This typically includes wedding expenditures and house construction and renovation. Migration is considered most suitable to men, since social norms predominantly assign breadwinning responsibilities to men. Moreover, since migrant work is often physically demanding, it is perceived as more suitable for young men. Furthermore, young men may also choose to migrate to avoid compulsory military service in Tajikistan.

*"His children are going to school. We are spending it [remittances] on them. We are using it for household needs, food, clothing, health care." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"When they [men] are mature, they migrate to earn money for the wedding. They marry, then leave their wives behind and migrate, because they are afraid of military service." (Male migrant, FGD Vakhsh)*

The recipient of remittances differs depending on the living arrangement at the origin location as well as on practical aspects, such as who has an account and can withdraw money. There are cases where a migrant sends money directly to his wife. However, given their position of authority and

responsibilities in household management, the migrant's parents typically receive the remittances. In multi-generational households, the parent can use remittances for household needs at his or her discretion, and may not necessarily hand (part of) the money to the migrant's wife. Young women may therefore have no or limited control over their husband's migration income and rarely know how much money their spouse earns. The amount of remittances sent is generally at the discretion of the migrant, though migrants might inquire about specific needs and decide to adjust the sent amount accordingly.

*"He sends it to his parents. I don't have any idea of how much he sends." (Wife of migrant, FGD Shahrituz)*

*"[My son sends remittances] to me. I have a card. I withdraw it. My daughter-in-law lives close to the center. She makes a list [of what she needs], and we purchase it and give it to her." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"They send it to me. We are all in one family. I have 2 daughters-in-law they are with me." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"Fortunately, three of them [migrating sons] are living separately. Their wives have cards, and they send money directly to them. Sometimes they make purchases and have extra money, and they help us too. Those [migrating sons] that are living with us send it to my card and I give it to their wives. I am old and shopping is on them." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

***Theme II: Mobility and decision-making (AGENCY)***

Women in our study area face restrictive social norms in terms of their mobility, in line with local and Islamic traditions. These social norms do not only limit women's opportunities to migrate internationally, but also confine women, especially young women, to their home. Men typically perform outward-facing tasks, such as visiting the market, selling agricultural output, bringing firewood, taking sick household members to the hospital, or participating in official meetings.

*"In our place girls don't have desire to migrate. We organize their weddings, and their husbands do not allow them to migrate. For instance, I have two daughters, I organize their wedding and now they are in their husband's house. They even don't have time to visit us, they are just raising their children." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"In this place based on our tradition women don't go out a lot. The religious content is different. We don't like when women go out of the house." (Male migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"Once in two years I go to my mother's house, asking my husband's permission." (Wife of migrant, IDI Sharituz)*

*"I don't go out that often and I don't know many things. I don't know how to deal in the market. My brother-in-law is also in charge of shopping, because I am not allowed to go somewhere." (Wife of migrant, IDI Balkhi)*

In the absence of a male spouse or other male adults in the home women can, however, perform these tasks. Moreover, since a husband's ability to supervise her activities during migration might be limited, some women experience stark increases in decision-making power over their own mobility, time use, or other, such as their choice of dress (e.g. wearing nikab).

*"My husband purchases [food], but if he is not present, I do it." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

*"I have more freedom. When he is here, I am following him [meaning preparing everything for him] for the whole day." (Wife of migrant, FGD Sharituz)*

*"When he is absent, women control everything. Once he comes, it becomes difficult." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

Young women, however, often reside with their family-in-law. In these households, the parents-in-law will continue acting as main household decision-makers and guardians of the migrant's spouse. Moreover, household members often stay in touch with the migrant using mobile messages, phone calls or video calls. This allows male migrants to stay in close contact with the family and participate in decision-making, particularly with respect to major decisions.

*"For those who live with parents-in-law there is no change. For those who live separately, it becomes easier." (Wife of migrant, FGD Sharituz).*

*"My husband makes decisions even if he is not present." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson).*

***Theme III: Workload (WELLBEING)***

A woman's responsibilities in the household can shift significantly based on the presence or absence of her husband. On the one hand, the absence of husbands implies a reduced workload for women in terms of spousal care responsibilities.

*"When my husband is here, we have to take care of both husband and children. When he is not here, we only take care of our children. When he is not here, we have less work to do." (Wife of migrant, FGD Balkhi).*

On the other hand, and especially in smaller nuclear households, women who stay behind often face an increased workload as they need to perform tasks that would otherwise be assigned to their husbands. This does not only include responsibilities such as purchasing food and non-food items (as explained earlier), but may also encompass agricultural activities, livestock management, and others. Several women discussed facing difficulties when needing to perform tasks typically assigned to men.

*"I have different problems. It is hard when there is no assistance. I have one child. This is a village, and there are cattle. There are works that we cannot do, like bringing firewood, and I cry because we need men or children to put it in the right place." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

*"It is difficult to live without men. For example, if you need something or guests come to your house and you need meat. By the time you find someone who can go and buy it for you, most of your time is lost. My daughters don't go out at all. I have to find someone. Life is difficult without a husband." (Wife of migrant, IDI Balkhi)*

Mothers whose sons migrate may similarly experience higher workloads, especially when there are no or few other adults remaining in the household. Not wanting their daughters or daughters-in-law to perform outward-facing tasks can also contribute to senior women's increased workload.

*"The work which they [migrants] are supposed to do, we are doing them. We have less time for leisure." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"My children are assisting if they are present. They're out shopping or taking their children to the doctor. But now I'm in charge of these responsibilities." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

***Theme IV: Intra-household relations (WELLBEING)***

The emotional distress that some respondents felt in the absence of their son or husband was one striking theme that emerged spontaneously and frequently during our interviews. Respondents expressed feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. Moreover, despite stereotypes that men's involvement in childcare and household chores is limited, many respondents regretted the loss of support from their husbands when they were migrating.

*"When he is here, life is different, it is sweeter, we go around together." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

*"We want them to be at home. We want to see them every day." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"My children are not seeing how their kids are growing. For example, they are too far. It's difficult for us to handle. We want them to be here and work while they are living with us. We want them to see how their children are growing, and we want them to be with their wives." (Mother of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"His absence is a big loss. For example, he is not there for his children. When the husband is present, the children are raised differently." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

Other male and female respondents mentioned how marital relationships can also improve when the husband migrates. For some couples, migration results in a shift towards more affectionate and loving behavior, and better mutual understanding. Moreover, some respondents expressed that accessing sufficient income to take care of the children's needs was more important than the physical presence of their father. Finally, in one group discussion, respondents mentioned positive changes in the migrant's point of view and behavior.

*"When he migrated to Russia, he became more loving. When he moves farther away, he becomes even more loving. Because of his love, I want him to be far. This is good. Further is better." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

*"As you mentioned, and as Russians say: "When you are far, you love more." Here when they are together, they don't value each other. But when they are far and don't see each other for two days, they miss each other more. They call each other, ask how they are doing." (Male migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"When he migrates, it is good for children because they are better fed and dressed. This is good for us. Love and affection for father never diminishes, even if he is far away. Progress is being made, that's good." (Wife of migrant, FGD Khuroson)*

*"The positive aspect is that they change, their point of view and perceptions changes. Their behavior changes." (Wife of migrant, FGD Vakhsh)*

Not all marriages, however, benefit from the large distance between husband and wife. It is well-known that some migrants establish affectionate relationships at their migration destination, leading to simultaneous marriages at home and at the migration destination. In some cases, husbands no longer maintain ties with their wives and children in Tajikistan, effectively leaving them behind without further news nor support. These women, however, may still live with – and take care of – their parents-

in-law. Some women decide to divorce and return to their parental home. Respondents did not commonly breach this topic themselves. Indirectly, however, questions about the household composition and marital status of household members, or questions about why women did not join their husbands at the migration destination, exposed several such cases. Finally, during the interviews with men who had migrated in the past, after gaining the trust of the respondent towards the end of the interview, the moderator directly inquired about this.

*"Because he has a wife there. His life is 100%. If I go there, what should I be doing?" (Wife of migrant, FGD Balkhi)*

*"The first time [I visited him], I went by myself. The second time, he invited me. When I went there for the second time, he had a wife." (Wife of migrant, FGD Vakhsh)*

*"[Do you have wife in Russia?] I had one." (Male migrant, IDI Vakhsh)*

## Quantitative results

The quantitative results confirm the large extent of labor migration among the households in our study area (Table 1, Table A.4). Approximately 60 percent of households had at least one member who migrated in the past year. When considering the last 10 years, this increases to 76 percent.[3] Accordingly, 64 percent of households received remittances in the past year. Among all adults (18-65 years)[4], 22 percent had migrated for work in the past 12 months, and 42 percent of men (Table A.5). Migrants are typically young men (Table 2, Table A.6). Only nine percent of labor migrants are women. Migrants are on average 32 years old, 75 percent are married while 21 percent have never been married. Many migrants (57 percent) were not employed prior to migration. Internal migration is limited (2 percent of migrants) as most migrants migrate to Russia (95 percent of all migrants).

**Table 1:** Prevalence of migration and remittance receipts

| | **All** |
|---|---|
| Household had a migrant in the past 12 months | 60% |
| Household had a migrant in the past 10 years | 76% |
| Household received remittances in the past 12 months | 64% |
| *# observations* | *1,998* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on household-level survey data of the full survey sample, weighted using cross-section sample weights. Two households with missing migration information were removed from the sample.

In this study, we focus on female respondents who are married. About 76 percent of all adult women in our study area are married (Table A.7). More than half of our respondents live with their parents-in-law (53 percent) and 44 percent live without their parents or parents-in-law (Table 3). Nearly half of all respondents have a senior role in the household. The average age of a respondent is 35 years. Whereas 57 percent of our respondents live in a household with at least one person who is currently migrating, a smaller share of respondents (36 percent) have a spouse who is migrating, or a son who is migrating (15 percent). Note that several household members might migrate concurrently, which explains why some respondents have both a migrating spouse as well as a migrating son.

[3] Note that, due to the difficulties in accurately defining a household in the presence of large-scale migration and extended family living arrangements as well as accurately recalling such long period of time, we expect this estimate to be biased downward as compared to the estimate with a one-year recall period.

[4] Note that here, we follow the respondents' designation of these people as household members. Unlike the more common (and strict) definition of household membership, these people may have been away from home for more than six months in the past 12 months.

**Table 2**: Migrant characteristics (aged 18-65 years)

| | All adult migrants | All male migrants |
|---|---|---|
| Gender (female =1) | 9% | n/a |
| Age (years) | 32.1 | 31.9 |
| Married | 75% | 76% |
| Never married | 21% | 23% |
| No longer married | 4% | 1% |
| *Sector of employment prior to migration* | | |
| No employment | 57% | 56% |
| Agriculture | 19% | 19% |
| Non-agriculture | 24% | 25% |
| *Migration destination* | | |
| Tajikistan | 2% | 2% |
| Russia | 95% | 95% |
| Kazakhstan | 2% | 2% |
| Other | 1% | 1% |
| *# observations* | *1,786* | *1,623* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on household-level survey data of the full survey sample, weighted using cross-section sample weights.

The descriptive statistics reveal low levels of empowerment among women (Table 3). On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (a high extent), on average respondents rate themselves 2.70 in having input in decisions around minor expenditures, 2.01 for major expenditures. More specifically, this means that only 61 percent of female respondents feel that to a medium or major extent they participate in decisions around minor expenditures, and 34 percent on major expenditures. On a scale of 1 (no or very little input) to 3 (input in most or all decisions), respondents have on average a score of 1.94 for decisions on crop income (conditional on their household having any crop income). This amounts to 67 percent of respondents having at least some input in decisions on how to use crop income. Strikingly, only 79 percent of women leave the home at least once per month for a visit to the market, relatives, friends, medical checks, or other. On average, respondents showing satisfaction with their leisure time (6.6; at a scale of 1 = not at all satisfied; to 10=fully satisfied). A quarter of women (25 percent) feels sometimes overwhelmed by a large workload.

Women whose husbands migrate are typically younger, more often have a young child, and more often live with their parents-in-law than women whose husbands are not migrating, but do not significantly differ when comparing a range of empowerment indicators (Table 3). Instead, however, we find significant differences in empowerment indicators between senior and junior women at home. Senior women have more input into decision making over minor expenses than junior women (3.00 vs. 2.43), more input in decisions on major expenses (2.30 vs. 1.75), and more input in decisions on income from crop farming (2.13 vs. 1.77). Moreover, 86 percent of senior women leaves home at least once per month, whereas this is only 73 percent of junior women. Yet, senior women more often feel overwhelmed by multiple tasks 29 percent vs. 22 percent), and have lower levels of agency compared to junior women (4.12 vs. 4.27).

**Table 3:** Characteristics of married female respondents, by migrant status of the spouse and seniority

| | All | Spouse is not migrating | Spouse is migrating | *Sig.* | Senior | Junior | *Sig.* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lives with parents | 2% | 1% | 4% | ** | 1% | 3% | * |
| Lives with parents-in-law | 53% | 49% | 62% | *** | 6% | 97% | *** |
| Lives without parents or parents-in-law | 44% | 50% | 35% | *** | 93% | 0% | *** |
| Senior household role | 48% | 53% | 38% | *** | 100% | 0% | n/a |
| Age (years) | 35.0 | 36.4 | 32.3 | *** | 41.6 | 28.9 | *** |
| Has a child <2 y old | 19% | 16% | 25% | *** | 10% | 28% | *** |
| Migrant household | 57% | 33% | 100% | *** | 53% | 61% | ** |
| Spouse is migrating | 36% | 0% | 100% | n/a | 28% | 42% | *** |
| Son is migrating [a] | 15% | 17% | 11% | ** | 27% | 3% | *** |
| Self-reported input in decisions on minor expenses (1 – 4) [b] | 2.70 | 2.71 | 2.69 | | 3.00 | 2.43 | *** |
| Has at least some input in decisions on minor expenses | 61% | 61% | 60% | | 74% | 49% | *** |
| Self-reported input in decisions on major expenses (1-4) [b] | 2.01 | 1.97 | 2.08 | | 2.30 | 1.75 | *** |
| Has at least some input in decisions on major expenses | 34% | 32% | 37% | | 46% | 23% | *** |
| Self-reported input in decisions on crop income (1-3) [c] | 1.94 | 1.92 | 1.97 | | 2.13 | 1.77 | *** |
| Has at least some input in decisions on crop income | 67% | 66% | 68% | | 73% | 61% | *** |
| Mobility (leaves home min. 1/month) | 79% | 78% | 82% | | 86% | 73% | *** |
| Feels overwhelmed sometimes | 25% | 24% | 27% | | 29% | 22% | *** |
| Leisure time satisfaction (1-10) | 6.60 | 6.64 | 6.51 | | 6.46 | 6.72 | |
| Agency [d] | 4.20 | 4.24 | 4.13 | | 4.12 | 4.27 | * |
| *# observations* | *938* | *605* | *333* | | *446* | *492* | |

Source: Authors' estimates based on individual-level survey data of married female respondents. Stars indicate significant differences based on migrant status or seniority, at ***p<0.01; ** p<0.05; *p<0.10. [a] This only includes sons who are considered household members, and does not include sons who have formed their own, separate household. [b] This scale varies from 1 = not at all; 2 = small extent; 3 = medium extent; 4= to a high extent. [c] This scale includes 1 = no or very little input; 2 = some input; 3= input in most/ all decisions. [d] This is the first principal component of a series of questions related to the respondent's agency.

In Table 4, we employ regression analyses to better understand the association between empowerment indicators and migration by controlling for relevant socio-economic characteristics of the respondent and her household. Junior women's outcomes are not strongly related with spousal migration, except for having more input in decisions regarding major expenses at home and having a lower sense of agency (Table 4). Similarly, we find that empowerment outcomes are not strongly associated with a son's migration, although women whose son migrates more often take decisions on minor expenses and have higher satisfaction levels with their leisure time.

**Table 4:** Regression results showing different associations between spousal migration and decision-making, mobility and agency

| | **Minor expenses** [b] *ordered probit* | **Major expenses** [b] *ordered probit* | **Plot income** [c] *ordered probit* | **Mobility** *probit* | **Agency** [d] *OLS regression* | **Time satisfaction** *OLS regression* | **Over-whelmed** *probit* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Migrant spouse | -0.121 | 0.262** | 0.001 | -0.022 | -0.250* | -0.191 | 0.082 |
| Migrant son [a] | 0.321** | 0.138 | 0.131 | 0.084 | 0.208 | 0.692** | -0.090 |
| Senior household role | 0.049 | 0.208 | 0.102 | -0.042 | -0.172 | -0.661** | 0.092 |
| Migrant spouse # senior household role | 0.405*** | 0.090 | 0.338* | 0.604*** | 0.186 | -0.108 | 0.125 |
| Age (years) | 0.029 | 0.087*** | 0.047 | 0.113** | -0.044 | -0.193** | 0.085** |
| Age squared | -0.000 | -0.001* | -0.000 | -0.001** | 0.000 | 0.003** | -0.001* |
| # male adult household members | -0.153*** | 0.050 | -0.040 | -0.148** | -0.044 | -0.059 | 0.003 |
| # female adult household members | -0.072 | -0.129** | -0.038 | -0.059 | 0.047 | -0.171 | 0.071 |
| Has a child <2y old | 0.015 | 0.002 | 0.015 | 0.033 | -0.179 | 0.026 | 0.150 |
| Education level | -0.032 | 0.087 | -0.118 | 0.200** | -0.093 | -0.194 | -0.065 |
| Constant term | | | | -1.435 | 5.438*** | 10.899*** | -2.585*** |
| cut1 | -0.703 | 1.882*** | 0.402 | | | | |
| cut2 | 0.192 | 2.547*** | 1.489** | | | | |
| cut3 | 1.316* | 3.547*** | | | | | |
| *No. of Observations* | *927* | *927* | *799* | *927* | *902* | *927* | *927* |
| Significance of effect of migrant spouse for those with senior household role (migrant spouse + Migrant spouse#senior household role) | ** | *** | * | *** | | | |

Source: Authors' calculations based on the IFPRI/USAID 2023 PBS for Khatlon Province, based on responses from individual women who are currently married. [a] This only includes sons who are considered household members, and does not include sons who have formed their own, separate household. [b] This scale varies from 1 = not at all; 2 = small extent; 3 = medium extent; 4= to a high extent. [c] This scale includes 1 = no or very little input; 2 = some input; 3= input in most/ all decisions. [d] Agency is the first principal component of agreement with five different statements related to agency of the respondent, with higher values indicating higher agency.

Migration mainly changes empowerment outcomes for spouses with senior roles in the household. Senior spouses are more likely to make decisions on minor and major expenditures, on the use of plot income, and face higher mobility in the absence of their spouse as compared to other senior women (Table 4; if the coefficient for migrant spouse and the interaction term between migrant spouse and senior household role are jointly significant). We don't find clear associations between a respondent's satisfaction with time use or in being overwhelmed with multiple tasks during their spouse's absence.

When considering the remainder of control variables, we see that women's decision-making over major expenses and mobility increases with their age (Table 4). Their satisfaction with time use, however, decreases, and the likelihood of becoming overwhelmed with different tasks increases. Likewise, women in senior household roles express lower satisfaction over their leisure time as compared to junior women. Women's decision-making over minor expenses and women's mobility reduce when there are more male adult household members. We don't find significant associations between having young children (<2 years old) and empowerment. Women with higher education levels experience more mobility, but we find no significant associations with other empowerment indicators.

To further verify whether a person's relationship with the migrant matters, we conducted similar analyses but relying on a household-level indicator of migration in Appendix Table A.8. In doing so, we ignore the specific relationship between the migrant and the respondent. There are, however, few remaining significant associations when we consider migration status of the household (rather than the spouse). Other control variables have similar coefficients as in Table 4.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Globally, millions of people leave their homes motivated by better employment opportunities elsewhere. Their close relatives, however, might stay behind in their location of origin, including their parents, spouse, or children. Apart from current or forthcoming improvements in household resources that can be funded through migrant income, the absence of the labor migrant is likely to also shift household responsibilities and might lead to changes in its members' empowerment. In settings with low levels of empowerment among women, but also with extended multi-generational households, the question therefore arises what happens to women's empowerment when their husbands or sons migrate.

We answer this question based on a mixed-method study focusing on rural Tajikistan. Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. Migration predominantly takes place among young men. Women, however, face limited mobility – particularly young women. Following patrilocal customs, many women – even newlyweds – stay behind with their parents-in-law. We rely on Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment to analyze how a household members' absence due to migration might change the ability to make strategic life choices and to achieve desirable outcomes for those staying behind, distinguishing between women with different household roles. The qualitative analysis uses primary data collected during 12 focus group discussions and 12 individual interviews with men and women, and uses reflexive thematic analysis. The quantitative analysis relies on survey data from 938 married women, and employs probit, ordered probit and ordinary least squares regression methods.

Increased access to money or other resources acquired through migration could provide a direct route towards improved economic empowerment for women. Yet, findings from our qualitative interviews show that women are not always active decision-makers on the remittances sent home. As remittances are commonly sent through intermediaries or senior household members, migrants' wives are often not direct recipients of remittances. Moreover, remittances may be earmarked for certain

predetermined expenses, and some migrants continue to participate in decisions on key expenditures by discussion through mobile technology. Indeed, quantitative results show that junior women do not have more input in decisions over minor expenses when their husband migrates, but they do feel that they have more input into major expenses. Women with senior roles in the household have more input in both minor and major decisions when their spouse or son migrates, and in major decisions when their spouse migrates. Given that major expenses might be more key to strategic life decisions than minor expenses, an increased feeling of having input into major decisions during the absence of their migrating spouse is a positive indication of higher empowerment.

The absence of a spouse could give women more freedom to decide over their day-to-day activities and mobility. In Tajik society, women face normative and logistical constraints in performing typical male tasks, such as visiting the market, taking sick household members to the hospital or participating in official meetings. In the absence of their spouse, women who do not live with their parents-in-laws can defy restrictive norms and often experience increased mobility and decision-making. However, women living with their parents-in-law experience no or limited changes. Our quantitative analyses show that women have limited mobility overall. However, women with senior positions have higher mobility when their spouse migrates, whereas we find no such effect among women with junior positions in multi-generational households. Although the literature often associates women's involvement in market visits and food purchasing with increased empowerment, interviews revealed that, for some women, engaging in these activities was perceived as a burden.

Respondents expressed several changes in wellbeing in the absence of a migrant spouse or son, which were experienced more positively by some and more negatively by others. Some female respondents appreciated having more independence in decision-making on their own daily activities and mentioned a reduced workload in the absence of their spouse. Others, however, expressed higher workloads and emphasized distress related to the absence of their husband for their own and children's emotional wellbeing. Similarly, we find no conclusive evidence regarding the associations with satisfaction with leisure time or being overwhelmed by a high workload in the quantitative analyses. Yet, it is associated with reduced satisfaction regarding time use only among women who live without parents-in-law, whereas it does not affect time use satisfaction among those living with their in-laws.

Strikingly, we find that women living with their parents-in-law have a lower sense of agency when their husband migrates as compared to when he does not migrate. Overall, though, daughters-in-law have higher levels of self-reported agency than senior women in general, despite their subordinate positions in their household. The high sense of agency, and the lack of concerns over leisure time and workload among young married women is surprising, given that it is well-established that they have excessive workloads in rural Tajikistan (Turaeva & Becker 2022). Yet, it aligns with findings of Hegland (2010) whose in-depth research shows that daughters-in-law accept their subordinate roles and the high demands on their time.

A key limitation of our study is the lack of causal identification of the impact of migration. It is likely that there is endogeneity between the migration status of a spouse and a women's empowerment status, whereby migration might not only impact the empowerment of a woman staying behind, but vice versa woman's empowerment might also contribute to the decision to migrate. Especially in a setting with such wide prevalence of migration, whereby a majority of adult men is currently or has formerly been a labor migrant, classic instruments such as the existence of migration networks and migrant density at the community of origin are unlikely to meaningfully predict migration. Moreover, a key focus of our analyses, household role, is often endogenous to the migration decision. Other limitations pertain to the availability of subjective wellbeing indicators, which are limited in the quantitative dataset. Moreover, a larger sample of respondents would be needed to distinguish impacts based on a more refined set of household roles and relationships to the migrant.

Our study contributes to the growing literature on empowerment of household members staying behind when men migrate, specifically from a relatively understudied region – Central Asia – with high rates of labor migration and strong, restrictive gender norms. A limited number of studies have relied on quantitative data from Tajikistan to assess the impact of migration on left-behind household members, e.g. on labor supply, education, food security or household expenditures. They considered aggregate impacts on households or assessing aggregate impacts of adults versus children, or on male versus female household members. Yet, in a setting where impacts might differ strongly across household members based on characteristics other than their gender, important insights are likely missed. Moreover, important dimensions of empowerment have been missed in these studies. Our study findings, however, resonate with those from in-depth studies in different yet similar setting across the globe – particularly in traditional societies with strong patriarchal and patrilocal norms such as Morocco (e.g. Lenoel 2017), Nepal (e.g. Doss et al. 2022), or Bangladesh (e.g. West et al. 2024).

Our study clearly demonstrates the importance of acknowledging that many households have extended living arrangements with complex hierarchies, roles, and differing inter-personal relations therein. The latter is particularly relevant for migration studies, given that migration often takes place in communities with extended family residence patterns and also affects – and generally encourages – co-residence choices of those staying behind (Bertoli & Murard 2020). Yet, despite these being documented by quantitative and qualitative scholars across a range of settings, many studies – even those focusing on specific gender-differentiated outcomes – continue to turn a blind eye towards respondents' complex household structures and their specific roles therein.

This also has implications for survey design and respondent selection. Clearly understanding the relationships between different adults in the household is key, but simple household rosters may not always allow for understanding the relationships between different household members in non-nuclear households. Where only one female (or male) adult household members is asked to complete the interview that inquires about the respondent's empowerment, studies risk omitting those members that have lower positions in their household. Unless sufficient attention is paid to avoid such omissions, young and less empowered women residing in extended households are likely to remain hidden. Simple modification in sampling design, more inclusive to women with different positions in the household, can have large impacts on the estimates of women's empowerment in general, and on the impacts of migration on women's empowerment more specifically.

*Note*
All personal information that would allow the identification of any person or person(s) described in the article has been removed.

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# APPENDIX

**Table A.1** Characteristics of qualitative study participants in individual interviews (n=12)

| Category | Gender | Age (years) | Position in household | District | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Former migrant | Male | 38 | Head of the household | Balkhi | |
| Former migrant | Male | 29 | Son | Khuroson | |
| Former migrant | Male | 33 | Son | Shahrituz | |
| Former migrant | Male | 53 | Head of the household | Vakhsh | |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 61 | Wife | Balkhi | Two daughters-in-law live with her. |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 43 | Wife whose husband and son are migrating | Khuroson | One daughter-in-law lives with her. |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 62 | Wife | Shahrituz | |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 50 | Head of the household | Vakhsh | Two daughters-in-law and her two daughters, both divorced, live with her. |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 42 | Wife whose husband is migrating | Balkhi | |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 30 | Daughter-in-law | Khuroson | |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 33 | Wife whose husband is migrating | Shahrituz | Her mother-in-law lives near her home. |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 53 | Head of the household | Vakhsh | Two daughters-in-law live with her. |

**Table A.2** Characteristics of qualitative study participants in focus group discussions (n= 97)

| Category | Gender | Age range (years) | Group size | District | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Former migrant | Male | 30-57 | 10 | Balkhi | |
| Former migrant | Male | 28-52 | 9 | Khuroson | One respondent was deported. |
| Former migrant | Male | 34-46 | 7 | Shahrituz | One respondent is married to a Russian woman and runs a business in Russia.<br>One respondent is a seasonal migrant. |
| Former migrant | Male | 39-68 | 8 | Vakhsh | |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 53-70 | 8 | Balkhi | |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 37-60 | 8 | Khuroson | |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 43-73 | 7 | Shahrituz | One respondent reported that her daughter had migrated. |
| Migrant's mother | Female | 48-70 | 8 | Vakhsh | One respondent is a teacher at an elementary school.<br>One respondent is employed as a cleaner in a hospital. |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 23-44 | 8 | Balkhi | Five respondents live with their parents-in-law. |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 24-48 | 8 | Khuroson | Four respondents live with their parents-in-law |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 19-56 | 8 | Shahrituz | Five respondents live with their parents-in-law. |
| Migrant's wife | Female | 31-61 | 8 | Vakhsh | One respondent lives with her parents.<br>Four respondents live with their parents-in-law. |

**Table A.3** Agency scale, detailed composition of the first principal component

| Statement | Response | Contribution to the first principal component |
|---|---|---|
| In the long run, hard work generally brings a better life. | 1 = strongly disagree | -1.058 |
| | 2 = disagree | -0.772 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.646 |
| | 4 = agree | -0.411 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.154 |
| Hard work doesn't generally bring success—it's more a matter of luck and coincidence. | 1 = strongly disagree | -0.719 |
| | 2 = disagree | -0.407 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.294 |
| | 4 = agree | -0.210 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.101 |
| When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them. | 1 = strongly disagree | -1.299 |
| | 2 = disagree | -0.960 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.788 |
| | 4 = agree | -0.489 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.181 |
| In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me. | 1 = strongly disagree | -1.380 |
| | 2 = disagree | -1.049 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.867 |
| | 4 = agree | -0.518 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.183 |
| I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks. | 1 = strongly disagree | -1.335 |
| | 2 = disagree | -1.021 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.844 |
| | 4 = agree | -0.512 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.179 |
| Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well. | 1 = strongly disagree | -1.303 |
| | 2 = disagree | -0.954 |
| | 3 = neutral | -0.779 |

| Statement | Response | Contribution to the first principal component |
|---|---|---|
| | 4 = agree | -0.493 |
| | 5 = strongly agree | 0.180 |

**Table A.4:** Households with migrants and remittances, study sample only

| | Study sample |
|---|---|
| Household had a migrant in the last 12 months | 66% |
| Household had a migrant in the past 10 years | 83% |
| Household received remittances in the past year | 70% |
| *# observations* | *938* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on household-level survey data of the households of the women included in the main analyses, unweighted.

**Table A.5:** Migration among adults and adult men (18-65 years), full sample and study sample

| | All adults | | Male adults | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Full sample | Study sample | Full sample | Study sample |
| Migrated for work (past year) | 22% | 25% | 42% | 46% |
| gender (female =1) | 52% | 49% | 0% | 0% |
| age (years) | 36.6 | 36.7 | 36.1 | 36.3 |
| married | 75% | 83% | 76% | 78% |
| never married | 15% | 13% | 22% | 20% |
| no longer married | 9% | 5% | 2% | 2% |
| *# observations* | *7,966* | *3,647* | *3,842* | *1,871* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on household-level survey data of the adults in the full dataset (Full sample); and the adults in the households of the women included in the main analyses (Study sample). Descriptives based on the full sample are weighted using cross-section sample weights. Descriptives based on the study sample are not weighted.

**Table A.6:** Migration characteristics among all migrants and male migrants (18-65 years), study sample

| | All adult migrants | All male migrants |
|---|---|---|
| Gender (female =1) | 7% | n/a |
| Age (years) | 32.7 | 32.4 |
| Married | 79% | 78% |
| Never married | 20% | 21% |
| No longer married | 2% | 1% |
| *Sector of employment prior to migration* | | |
| No employment | 59% | 58% |
| Agriculture | 16% | 16% |
| Non-agriculture | 25% | 26% |
| *Migration destination* | | |
| Tajikistan | 2% | 2% |
| Russia | 94% | 95% |
| Kazakhstan | 2% | 2% |
| Other | 1% | 1% |
| *# observations* | *929* | *867* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on survey data of adults living in the households of the women included in the main analyses, unweighted

**Table A.7:** Comparing marital status, age and seniority among all women in our study area and women in our study sample

| | All women | Married, female respondents |
|---|---|---|
| Married | 76% | 100% |
| Never married | 11% | 0% |
| No longer married | 13% | 0% |
| Age (years) | 33.4 | 35.0 |
| Senior household role | 33% | 48% |
| Husband is away | 33% | 36% |
| Migrant household | 55% | 57% |
| Lives without parents or parents-in-law | 42% | 44% |
| Lives with parents | 14% | 2% |
| Lives with parents-in-law | 44% | 53% |
| *# observations* | *3,377* | *938* |

Source: Authors' estimates based on household-level survey data of women aged 18-55 years old living in survey households (All women), and on the sample of married female respondents included in the main analyses of the paper (Married, female respondents), unweighted

**Table A.8:** Regression results showing different associations between migration (any household member is currently away for labor migration) and decision-making, mobility and agency

| | **Minor expenses** *ordered probit* | **Major expenses** *ordered probit* | **Plot income** *ordered probit* | **Mobility** *probit* | **Agency** *OLS regression* | **Time satisfaction** *OLS regression* | **Over-whelmed** *probit* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Migrant member | -0.003 | 0.056 | 0.022 | -0.091 | 0.148 | -0.013 | 0.106 |
| Senior household role | 0.122 | 0.160 | 0.124 | -0.045 | -0.055 | -0.659** | 0.138 |
| Migrant member # senior household role | 0.163 | 0.115 | 0.184 | 0.367* | -0.024 | 0.091 | -0.047 |
| Age (years) | 0.032 | 0.083** | 0.055 | 0.130*** | -0.030 | -0.202*** | 0.096** |
| Age squared | -0.000 | -0.001** | -0.001 | -0.002*** | 0.000 | 0.003*** | -0.001** |
| # male adult household members | -0.148*** | 0.011 | -0.052 | -0.161*** | 0.005 | -0.000 | -0.015 |
| # female adult household members | -0.074 | -0.127** | -0.054 | -0.059 | 0.025 | -0.178 | 0.051 |
| Has a child <2y old | 0.012 | 0.007 | 0.007 | 0.027 | -0.178 | 0.007 | 0.147 |
| Education level | -0.012 | 0.086 | -0.111 | 0.192** | -0.084 | -0.159 | -0.052 |
| Constant term | | | | -1.545* | 4.907*** | 10.690*** | -2.711*** |
| cut1 | -0.531 | 1.650*** | 0.491 | | | | |
| cut2 | 0.359 | 2.310*** | 1.571** | | | | |
| cut3 | 1.473** | 3.294*** | | | | | |
| *No. of Observations* | *938* | *938* | *807* | *938* | *912* | *938* | *938* |
| Significance of effect of having migrant hh member for those with senior household role (migrant member + Migrant member#senior household role) | | | * | * | | | |

**Note:** Authors' calculations based on the IFPRI/USAID 2023 PBS for Khatlon Province, based on responses from individual women who are currently married. [a] This only includes sons who are considered household members, and does not include sons who have formed their own, separate household. [b] This scale varies from 1 = not at all; 2 = small extent; 3 = medium extent; 4= to a high extent. [c] This scale includes 1 = no or very little input; 2 = some input; 3= input in most/ all decisions. [d] Agency is the first principal component of agreement with five different statements related to agency of the respondent, with higher values indicating higher agency.

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