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## **Lonely Homes: Revealing the Psycho-Social, Emotional and Health Challenges of Left behind Elderly Parents by International Migrant Children In Haryana**

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17637000>**

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### **ARTICLE DETAILS**

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 26-10-2025

**Published:** 10-11-2025

### **Keywords:**

International migration, left-behind parents, psycho-social impact, loneliness, elderly health, community perceptions, family separation, Haryana, qualitative research, coping strategies

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the psycho-social impact of adult children's international migration on left-behind elderly parents in Haryana's Ambala division, India. The research focused on experiences of loneliness, health outcomes, and community perceptions among 64 parents aged 60 to 78 years whose children had migrated abroad for work or education. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study captured the lived experiences of participants facing emotional, social, and health-related challenges. Findings revealed profound loneliness, emotional distress, and deterioration in both mental and physical health, largely attributed to prolonged separation and reduced caregiving support. Coping strategies such as religious engagement, community participation, and digital communication were adopted, though technological contact provided only limited emotional comfort. Community perceptions played a crucial role in shaping parent's social integration, with acceptance enhancing well-being and stigma intensifying isolation. Overall, the study highlighted the hidden socio-emotional costs of migration beyond economic benefits and emphasized the need for targeted mental health and social support initiatives for elderly individuals left behind in migration-affected regions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Migration and Its Relevance to Haryana

International migration is one of the most defining socio-economic phenomena of the twenty-first century, reshaping communities, economies, and family relationships worldwide. According to the International Organization for Migration (2024), approximately 304 million people representing nearly 3.7% of the global population were living outside their country of birth in 2024, a sharp increase from 173 million in 2000. This trend reflects the growing influence of globalization, labour mobility, and educational opportunities across borders. The Migration Policy Institute (2025) reports that India remains the largest source of international migrants, with over 18.5 million Indians residing abroad, contributing substantially to global remittances and the national economy.

While migration is often perceived as a sign of socio-economic advancement, it also introduces new social challenges. Across countries such as the Philippines, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Mexico, studies have revealed that international migration leads to changing family dynamics, including emotional strain among those left behind (Lehti et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020). In India, migration has historically been concentrated in states like Kerala, Punjab, Gujarat, and Haryana, where aspirations for foreign education and employment have become deeply embedded in local culture. These migration hubs share similar characteristics rising youth migration, rural depopulation, and changing intergenerational relationships yet the emotional experiences of elderly parents in Haryana remain under-researched.

Haryana, known for its strong kinship ties and traditional family values, is experiencing rapid transformation as increasing numbers of young adults migrate to countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The Ambala Division, which includes districts like Ambala, Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar, and Panchkula, has seen a notable surge in international migration over the past decade. The Push–Pull Model of Migration (Lee, 1966) explains this phenomenon as an outcome of “push” factors (unemployment, rural stagnation, social aspirations and “pull” factors (better income, global exposure, improved living standards abroad). However, this movement has also created a generation gap, leaving aging parents emotionally and socially vulnerable in their home communities.

### 1.2 Psycho-Social Concerns of Left-Behind Parents

Migration-induced family separation often leads to emotional and psychological distress among elderly parents. While financial remittances can improve living standards, they cannot replace the emotional warmth and companionship that daily interactions provide (Thapa, Acharya, & Gautam, 2024). Elderly



parents left behind frequently report loneliness, sadness, and a sense of incompleteness in their lives. As Yadav (2025) observed in a Haryana-based study, many parents describe their homes as “quiet but heavy,” reflecting an emotional vacuum that transcends material well-being.

Several psychological theories help explain these experiences. The Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) emphasizes the emotional bonds that sustain individual’s sense of security. The migration of adult children disrupts these attachments, often triggering feelings of loss, abandonment, and insecurity among parents. Similarly, Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) highlights that emotional and instrumental support systems such as family presence, neighbourhood interaction, and caregiving play crucial roles in maintaining mental health. The absence of such support can lead to increased stress and social withdrawal. In addition, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how belonging to a social group shapes self-esteem and well-being. For left-behind parents, reduced community engagement and shifting perceptions of social worth can further deepen emotional isolation.

In Haryana’s collectivist context, the absence of children alters both family identity and community participation. Some parents face subtle stigma or pity, as their households appear “incomplete” in the social fabric. Yet others draw resilience from religious engagement, local networks, and digital communication, using these as coping mechanisms to manage emotional distress. This balance between vulnerability and adaptation reflects the complex psycho-social realities of left-behind elderly parents.

### **1.3 Linking Global and Indian Perspectives**

The psycho-social impact of migration on left-behind parents has been widely documented globally. In Nepal and the Philippines, elderly parents of migrants have reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances compared to those living with their children (Lehti et al., 2016). In China, Liu et al. (2020) found that rural elderly whose children migrated to cities experienced greater loneliness despite improved financial status. Similar trends are emerging in India, where rapid globalization and migration have disrupted the traditional joint family system (Sarkar, 2023). However, much of the Indian literature focuses on the economic consequences of migration rather than its emotional and social dimensions. Hence, exploring Haryana’s experience contributes a vital regional perspective to this growing global discourse.

### **1.4 Purpose, Scope, and Rationale of the Study**

This study explores how the international migration of adult children affects the emotional and social lives of the elderly parents they leave behind in Haryana’s Ambala Division. It focuses on three major



aspects loneliness, health outcomes, and community perceptions to understand how these parents experience and respond to the challenges of separation.

**The study is guided by three main research questions:**

1. How do left-behind parents experience and cope with the loneliness and mental health challenges caused by their children's migration abroad?
2. What physical and psychological health effects are visible among these elderly parents?
3. How do community attitudes and social relationships influence their emotional well-being and sense of belonging?

To make sense of these experiences, the study draws upon four well-established theories:

- **The Push–Pull Model of Migration (Lee, 1966)** explains why people migrate, focusing on the social and economic factors that “push” them from their home country and “pull” them toward foreign destinations.
- **Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969)** highlights the emotional bonds between parents and children, showing how separation can create feelings of loss and insecurity.
- **Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985)** emphasizes how relationships with family, friends, and the community can protect mental health and provide emotional comfort.
- **Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)** explores how individuals see themselves as part of a group and how social belonging or lack of it affects their self-esteem and well-being.

Because the topic deals with deep emotions and unique personal experiences, the study uses a qualitative phenomenological design. This approach helps to understand the real-life stories and personal feelings of elderly parents rather than just numbers or statistics. It gives voice to their experiences how they interpret their situation, the ways they cope, and how they perceive community behaviour toward them.

Unlike quantitative research, which measures general trends, this qualitative method captures the human side of migration the subtle emotions, changing family dynamics and social adjustments that numbers cannot fully explain. This design was chosen to reveal the hidden emotional realities and contextual differences among migration-affected families in Haryana.



In essence, this study not only contributes to academic understanding but also sheds light on the real emotional struggles of left-behind parents. It hopes to guide policymakers, community workers, and social organizations in developing meaningful support systems for elderly people whose children have migrated abroad.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Conceptual Overview

The literature on international migration and its psycho-social consequences reveals a dual reality: while migration contributes to economic development and global connectivity, it also disrupts family cohesion, especially for elderly parents left behind. Over the past two decades, researchers have focused on how loneliness, health deterioration, and community perceptions shape the lived experiences of this population. Studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America consistently demonstrate that migration's emotional costs often outweigh its financial benefits when viewed through a psychosocial lens (Lehti et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020; Antman, 2022).

In India, however, most migration research has traditionally emphasized economic remittances and demographic changes rather than emotional well-being. The lived experiences of left-behind elderly parents their emotional coping strategies, self-concept, and community identity remain comparatively underexplored (Sarkar, 2023; Yadav, 2025). The following review synthesizes global and Indian studies around three interrelated themes: **(a)** loneliness and emotional well-being, **(b)** physical and psychological health outcomes, and **(c)** social support and community perceptions.

### 2.2 Loneliness and Emotional Well-being

The emotional consequences of children's migration are well documented across global contexts. Elderly parents often experience deep loneliness, sadness, and a sense of abandonment when separated from their children (Lehti et al., 2016). In rural China, Liu et al. (2020) observed that left-behind elderly report lower life satisfaction and higher levels of depressive symptoms than those living with their families. Similarly, a study in Mexico by Antman (2022) found that even when remittances improved financial conditions, the psychological void caused by family separation persisted.

In the South Asian context, Thapa, Acharya, and Gautam (2024) reported that elderly parents in Nepal experience both emotional emptiness and pride, reflecting mixed feelings about their children's success abroad. In India, similar findings have emerged from states like Kerala and Punjab, where international



migration is common. Yet, research specifically exploring northern states such as Haryana remains limited. This regional gap highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how socio-cultural values influence loneliness among left-behind parents.

### **2.3 Physical and Psychological Health Outcomes**

Migration indirectly affects the health of those left behind. Studies have shown that emotional distress can manifest as psychosomatic symptoms, including fatigue, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbances (Wu et al., 2021). The absence of adult children often disrupts traditional caregiving arrangements, increasing vulnerability to chronic illnesses among elderly parents (Biao, 2018).

In a longitudinal study conducted in rural Bangladesh, Islam and Hossain (2022) found that elderly individuals with migrant children exhibited higher rates of hypertension and depressive symptoms compared to those whose children lived locally. In India, limited healthcare access and dependence on remittances exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Sarkar, 2023). The findings collectively suggest that migration-related stress is not merely emotional but also physiological, requiring both psychological and community-based interventions.

### **2.4 Social Support, Community Perceptions, and Coping Mechanisms**

Social and community contexts significantly influence how elderly parents experience and cope with migration-induced loneliness. According to Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), emotional and instrumental support networks act as buffers against stress. When such support is lacking, individuals experience heightened vulnerability.

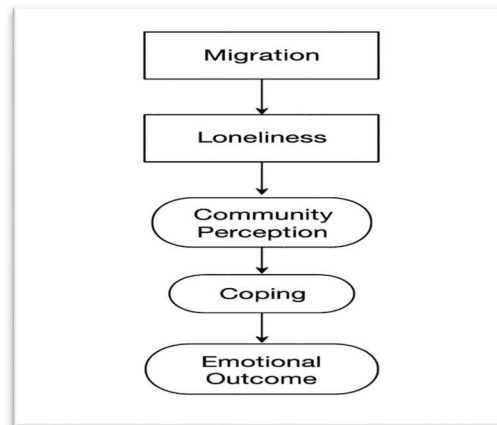
Leung and Lee (2021) found that social integration through religious groups or community associations improves resilience among left-behind elderly in Hong Kong. Similarly, Gao and Li (2022) observed that participation in local events and digital communication with migrant children reduces perceived isolation among Chinese elders. In India, however, social norms and stigmatization may limit open discussions about loneliness. Elderly parents often face subtle community judgments being seen as “dependent” or “neglected” which can intensify emotional strain (Rajan & Kumar, 2023).

Nonetheless, resilience and adaptive coping are evident. Many parents in Haryana reportedly engage in religious rituals, neighbourhood interactions, or video calls to sustain emotional connections. These coping strategies highlight how individual and cultural factors intersect to shape well-being.

### **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

Drawing from the reviewed literature, the study conceptualizes migration as a multidimensional stressor that triggers emotional, physical, and social consequences for left-behind parents.

**Figure: 1 Conceptual Framework of the Psycho-Social Impact of Migration on Left-Behind Parents**



### 2.5.1 Conceptual Framework: Emotional, Health, and Social Dimensions of Migration

#### 1. Migration of Adult Children

→ Disrupts traditional caregiving roles and daily emotional contact.

#### 2. Emotional Outcomes (Attachment Theory)

→ Increased loneliness, sadness, and a sense of loss.

#### 3. Health Outcomes

→ Psychological stress manifests as physical ailments and reduced vitality.

#### 4. Social Outcomes (Social Identity Theory)

→ Changes in community perception, social identity, and perceived belonging.

#### 5. Coping and Resilience

→ Social support networks, religious engagement, and technology-mediated communication moderate negative effects.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Paradigm and Design



This study adopted an interpretivist approach, focusing on understanding the personal experiences of participants. Using a phenomenological design, it explored the emotional and social lives of elderly parents whose adult children had migrated abroad. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of their feelings of loneliness, the strategies they use to cope, and how they perceive support from their communities.

### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The study was conducted in Haryana's Ambala Division, including Ambala, Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar, and Panchkula districts with significant international migration. Sixty-four (64) elderly parents (aged 60–78) participated, each having a child abroad for at least two or more years. Purposive sampling ensured diversity in gender, socio-economic status, and community background, with 16 participants from each district. Data saturation was reached after 50 interviews, with additional participants included to confirm thematic consistency.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted in participant's native language. Key areas included experiences of loneliness, health challenges, coping mechanisms, and community perceptions. Triangulation enhanced validity through field notes, peer debriefing, and focus group discussions.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Procedure**

This study used a phenomenological approach within the interpretivist framework to understand how adult children's international migration affects the lives of left-behind parents in Haryana's Ambala Division. To gather insights, the researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 64 elderly parents, aged 60 to 78 years. The semi-structured format allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences, while also giving the researcher the flexibility to explore important aspects such as emotional well-being, social relationships, and coping strategies.

The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method. This involved:

1. Becoming familiar with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts.
2. Identifying meaningful statements and creating initial codes.



3. Looking for patterns to form themes.
4. Reviewing these themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data.
5. Clearly defining and naming each theme.
6. Organizing the themes into a coherent narrative for reporting.

To ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings, the researcher used member checking, where participants reviewed the interpretations, peer debriefing, and triangulation through field notes and observations. This careful approach ensured that the results genuinely reflected the participants' lived experiences.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were maintained with informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Sensitive topics were handled empathetically, and participants were informed of available psychological and community support if needed.

## **4. FINDINGS**

This study explored the psycho-social impact of adult children's international migration on left-behind parents aged 60-75 in the Ambala division of Haryana, encompassing Ambala, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, and Panchkula. Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews identified five central themes: emotional loneliness, health challenges, coping strategies, functional independence, and community perceptions. Gender and rural-urban differences were noted and integrated into the analysis where relevant.

### **4.1 Emotional Loneliness as a Persistent Condition**

Parents frequently reported deep and on-going feelings of loneliness due to the absence of their children. This emotional void affected daily routines and overall well-being.

**Coded summary:** Approximately 85% of participants described persistent emotional distress, including feelings of abandonment and longing.

#### **Parents' perspectives:**

- “Even after talking to my son on video calls, I feel empty. Nothing can replace him being here.”



- “My days feel long and lonely; I miss my daughter terribly.”

**Analytical commentary:** Mothers generally expressed more intense emotional experiences, whereas fathers emphasized the functional consequences of children’s absence. Emotional loneliness appeared as a sustained, rather than situational, burden, affecting both mental and social well-being.

#### 4.2 Physical and Mental Health Challenges Linked to Separation

Separation from adult children contributed to both physical and psychological health difficulties. Participants commonly associated increased stress and anxiety with the exacerbation of chronic illnesses, sleep disturbances, and lowered overall health.

**Coded summary:** About 70% of participants reported heightened anxiety, insomnia, or worsening of pre-existing health conditions.

#### Illustrative quotes:

- “Since my children moved abroad, my blood pressure has risen. I cannot sleep properly, and my health keeps deteriorating.”
- “I developed arthritis pain and frequent headaches. Stress from loneliness makes it worse.”

**Analytical insight:** Emotional loneliness and physical helplessness acted as mediators between stress and chronic health issues. Urban participants, despite better access to healthcare, still experienced stress-related ailments, while rural participants faced additional challenges due to limited resources and mobility constraints.

#### 4.3 Functional Independence and Its Impact on Well-Being

The ability to manage daily routines and personal care independently significantly influenced participants’ well-being. Parents who could walk, perform household tasks, and engage in daily activities reported higher emotional stability and life satisfaction than those with severe physical limitations.

**Coded summary:** Approximately 65% of participants who maintained functional independence described better emotional and physical well-being.

#### Parent’s reflections:

- “I can manage my chores and take care of myself; it keeps me busy and less lonely.”



- “Even though my children hired a caretaker, she does not take proper care. Nothing can replace my own children’s presence.”

**Analytical commentary:** Older participants requiring assistance faced greater emotional distress, even when children arranged domestic help. Male parents were often able to manage and survive to some extent despite their children’s absence; however, older, bedridden, or alone female parents left behind faced extreme challenges in daily survival. Many emphasized that no substitute could replace the presence of their children, citing the unique bond of blood relation and emotional attachment. Physical helplessness combined with emotional stress also contributed to the worsening of chronic conditions, such as hypertension, arthritis, and diabetes.

#### 4.4 Adaptive Coping Mechanisms

Parents employed multiple strategies to cope with emotional and social challenges, including religious practices, community engagement, and digital communication with their children.

**Coded summary:** Sixty percent participated in religious or social gatherings, and 50% used digital tools to maintain contact with their children.

#### Verbatim accounts:

- “Praying every day and attending temple functions helps me feel less alone.”
- “Video calls with my daughter bring me some joy, but it is not the same as having her here.”

**Analytical commentary:** While these strategies provided some relief, digital communication was often insufficient for emotional fulfilment, particularly among older participants less familiar with technology. Informal community groups and local support networks offered critical social support, helping reduce feelings of isolation.

#### 4.5 Community Perceptions and Social Integration

The degree of community support and social inclusion significantly influenced participant’s well-being. Experiences ranged from positive engagement to subtle exclusion.

**Coded summary:** Forty percent of participants reported social exclusion, whereas 60% felt supported by their communities.

#### Parent’s reflections:



- “Neighbours are kind, but they cannot fill the gap left by my children.”
- “Sometimes I feel ignored because everyone thinks I have enough money now; they do not see my loneliness.”

**Analytical commentary:** Supportive community interactions buffered emotional distress, while perceived neglect amplified feelings of loneliness. Rural participants depended heavily on intimate local networks, whereas urban participants accessed broader social contacts that were less emotionally supportive.

#### 4.6 Summary of Findings

Overall, the study demonstrates a complex interplay between emotional distresses, physical and mental health, functional independence, coping strategies, and social integration among left-behind parents. Economic benefits resulting from migration did not fully compensate for the psycho-social costs experienced. Functional independence emerged as a critical factor in well-being, while reliance on hired caregivers was often insufficient. Physical helplessness combined with emotional stress was linked to worsening chronic illnesses.

Male parents were often able to manage and survive to some extent despite their children’s absence; however, older, bedridden, or alone female parents left behind faced extreme challenges in daily survival. Gender, rural–urban context, and physical functionality shaped the intensity and manifestation of loneliness, health challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceived community support.

Community perceptions critically influenced parent’s social integration and sense of self-worth. Echoing observations from other collectivistic societies, community acceptance and social support serve as vital buffers against loneliness, while stigma and social exclusion exacerbate the vulnerability of these parents (Das & Chandra, 2004; Kumar & Singh, 2024). Gender dynamics also influenced experiences, with fathers often gaining community respect linked to financial remittances, while mothers experienced greater social engagement, yet both faced emotional hardship (Zhao & Shangguan, 2025). The localized variations between districts in Haryana emphasize tailoring culturally sensitive social interventions.

This study reinforces the imperative that migration research extends its focus beyond migrants to those left behind, particularly elderly parents. The psycho-social costs borne by left-behind parents represent a largely hidden social consequence that, if unaddressed, risks undermining family cohesion and community health. Policy and caregiving interventions must address caregiving gaps and emotional



wellbeing, recognizing the specific needs of this vulnerable population segment (Antman, 2012; Dakua et al., 2023; Thapa et al., 2018).

## **5. Discussion**

This study highlights the emotional, social, and health challenges faced by elderly parents in Haryana's Ambala division due to the international migration of their adult children. While migration often improves families' economic situations through remittances, it simultaneously imposes significant emotional and social costs on those left behind (Bhandari, Sharma, & Singh, 2025; Mandal, Paul, & Kasemi, 2024).

### **5.1 Emotional and Social Impact**

The findings align closely with previous studies indicating that elderly parents with emigrant children experience greater loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared to those whose children live nearby. Bhandari et al. (2025) reported that such parents experience on-going psychological distress, mainly due to prolonged separation and constant concern about their children's well-being. Similarly, Mandal et al. (2024) observed that Indian parents of migrant children face heightened emotional, social, and health challenges, making them a particularly vulnerable group. These findings reinforce the view that emotional detachment from family members can erode psychological well-being and social connectedness among older adults.

### **5.2 Health Implications**

Consistent with Dakua, Mandal, and Paul (2025), the present study found that separation from adult children is associated with worsening chronic conditions and psychological distress among elderly parents. Many participants reported issues such as insomnia, hypertension, and the aggravation of pre-existing illnesses. These physical symptoms often stemmed from emotional loneliness and a sense of helplessness. Sarkar (2023) also emphasized that migration-related separation contributes substantially to the decline in both physical and mental health among older adults in India. Together, these findings illustrate the deep interconnection between emotional well-being and physiological health in later life.

### **5.3 Coping Mechanisms**

To cope with emotional and social difficulties, parents adopted various strategies, including religious involvement, participation in community gatherings, and maintaining digital communication with their children. However, Sharma, Kaur, and Singh (2025) noted that such virtual interactions are often



insufficient to meet older adults' emotional needs, especially when they are not technologically adept. For many, community networks and neighbourhood support served as important buffers against loneliness and emotional isolation, helping them maintain a sense of belonging and purpose in daily life.

#### **5.4 Policy Implications**

The findings underscore the need to strengthen social welfare initiatives, such as Haryana's Senior Citizens' Policy, to better support left-behind elderly parents. This can be achieved through structured emotional support programs, easily accessible healthcare services, and reliable in-home assistance. Rahman, Gupta, and Patel (2025) stress the importance of community-based interventions that foster social inclusion and monitor caregiver effectiveness. Implementing such measures can help alleviate emotional distress and functional dependence, thereby promoting dignity, autonomy, and overall quality of life among elderly parents.

#### **5.5 Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study offers valuable insights, its qualitative design and limited geographic focus restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research could use mixed-methods approaches across multiple Indian states to examine regional variations in the psychosocial effects of migration. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to better understand the long-term health trajectories of left-behind parents. Moreover, gender-specific analyses are needed, as older women often exhibit greater emotional vulnerability and social isolation (Bhandari et al., 2025; Mandal et al., 2024).

### **6. Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the deep psycho-social challenges faced by elderly parents left behind in Haryana's Ambala division due to their adult children's international migration. While migration brings important economic benefits, it also leads to significant emotional loneliness, mental and physical health struggles, and difficulties in social integration for these parents. Even though various coping strategies like community involvement and digital communication offer some relief, they cannot fully replace the presence and support of children.

To address these challenges, policies must be designed with a focus on mental health support tailored for the elderly, including establishing local "Elderly Support Networks" that foster social connection and resilience. Tele-counselling services and community mental health outreach programs can provide accessible psychological care to those isolated by migration. Additionally, digital literacy initiatives



should help older adults use communication technologies more effectively, reducing the barriers to virtual contact with family. It is also crucial to combat community stigma and promote acceptance to strengthen the social fabric around left-behind parents.

Looking beyond this study's regional context, these findings resonate with many global South communities experiencing similar patterns of transnational migration. Future research should consider broader geographic areas and use longitudinal designs to understand how the impacts of migration evolve over time. By sharing the lived experiences of elderly parents left behind, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of migration's social consequences and underscores the need for family-centered migration policies that safeguard the wellbeing of those who remain at home.

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