Predictive Role of Father Absence in Shaping Self-Esteem and Emotional Intelligence among Adolescent Girls: A Cross-Sectional Analysis in Rural West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

In Indian society, the position of a father in maintaining the family, is very much crucial. The present research work aimed to examine the role of father absence due to migration for better economic opportunities, on the self-esteem and emotional intelligence among the adolescent girls in rural West Bengal, India. The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to collect the data from 1547 adolescent girls aged between 12 to 18 years across 63 schools and 4 colleges in Cooch Behar District of West Bengal, using stratified purposive sampling method. The psychological outcomes of these adolescent girls were documented using two standardized instruments namely Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire- Short Form (TEIQue-SF).

The findings of the independent sample t-test demonstrated the poor scenario of the left behind adolescent girls (M=22.93) whose mean score of self-esteem was significantly lower than their counter parts (M=24.56; $p< 0.001$), living with their fathers. Furthermore, the results of ordinal logistic regression canvased the predictive role of father absence, which significantly reduced the likelihood of belonging to higher emotional intelligence categories ($\beta = -3.028$, $p < .001$; OR = 0.048). The other socio-demographic variables such as caste, religion, family type, and learning generation did not emerge as significant predictors.

The findings of the study established the role of father absence as a robust and independent determinant that reduced the self-esteem and emotional intelligence among the adolescent girls in the study area. The study underscores the pressing need of schools and community-based innervations with an aim to strengthen the emotional intelligence and fostering the self-esteem among left-behind adolescent girls. Moreover, the study also aimed to contribute to the limited body of empirical research on gendered based psychological consequences due to migration in rural India and also offers some valuable insights of policy implications for better mental health and social support systems of adolescent girls.

Keywords: Father absence; Left-behind children; Self-esteem; Emotional intelligence; Adolescent girls; Rural West Bengal; Migration; Psychosocial development

INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanization and an ongoing economic inequality situation in the modern India has led to the massive rural-urban and industrial migration of an Indian worker to urban centers and industrial places (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2022). One example of this trend is West Bengal which is largely agrarian, so a large share of rural families lose men to remittance, which allow them to make ends meet (Government of India, 2021; NSSO, 2019). According to recent estimates, the rates of internal migration in rural locations are high, so often leading to the long-term absence of a father (PLFS Annual Report 202324). Although this economic approach is a financial necessity to most families, it tends to leave the children,

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especially the adolescent girls, left in the hands of their mothers, grandparents or their relatives. The children left behind face a distinctive psychological issue because the separation of parents reduces the family connections needed in regulating emotions, having secure attachment, and developing a positive identity (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Adhikari et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2020). Adolescence is the most important period during which a person is highly sensitive to the social relations, the impact of peers, and the development of a personal image (Steinberg, 2014). Patriarchal norms are highly established in rural West Bengal, where girls often turn into the victims of gender-specific burdens, often taking disproportionate domestic chores, have to care about younger sisters, and have fewer educational opportunities (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2010; Paul, 2025). The fatherlessness only intensifies such vulnerabilities by disrupting the provisioning of emotions, authority, and role modeling which may delay the maturity of resilience and adaptive psychosocial abilities required in adulthood (Lamb, 2010; Cui et al., 2021). A vast amount of research report has demonstrated the existence of steadfast negative relationships between father absence and psychological adjustment of daughters. A meta-analysis demonstrates significantly (0.3) less self-esteem among absence of father adolescents, which is largely mediated through loss of paternal involvement (McLanahan et al., 2013). Longitudinal and cross-cultural research further associates early fatherlessness with previous sexual initiation, reduced self-esteem and heightened emotional responsiveness in girls, all of which can often be attributed to impaired attachment security (Ellis et al., 2003; Bowlby, 1988; Durante et al., 2011). Out of the context of the Asian migration, as is the case with China and Philippines, left-behind girls demonstrate high rates of depressive symptoms, low emotional intelligence, and behavior problems but financial remittance does not offset the emotional deficit produced by the parents moving away (Nguyen, 2016; Graham and Jordan, 2011).In India, the situation is relatively less researched but also worrying. According to research, 30-35 percent of non-accompanied adolescents in states like Kerala show clinical amounts of apprehension, depressive indications or emotional mishaps that are directly associated with paternal migration of labour (Antony and Joseph, 2017). West Bengal qualitative narrations explain how adolescent girls take on an adultized role of housekeeping and child-rearing, which undermines personal self-esteem and prevents age-adequate psychosocial experience (Sahoo, 2019; Paul, 2025). According to recent quantitative studies, the left-behind status correlates with worse emotional processing, less self-esteem, and more internalizing issues among the rural Indian adolescents (Cui et al., 2021; Adhikari et al., 2025).

Physical and emotional unavailability of the father through labor is the meaning of father absence in the current situation, which is different as compared to absence caused by divorce or bereavement (Lamb, 2010). This phenomenon is prone in the rural Indian centers where fathers go to work abroad, remittances are sent, but they are not actually involved in the life of the family in any regular manner (Boss, 2006). In daughters, this lack cuts across with cultural norms of paternal authority to make decisions, discipline, give emotional support, and protect in a way that often results in a sense of abandonment, insecurity, and ambiguous loss, a type of grief that has no resolution and societal acceptance (Roopnaraine et al., 1990; Boss, 2006). In comparison with the Western context, where sufficient father absence is associated with family breakdowns and stigmatization, in India such absence is a well-established norm, as an economic necessity; however, the growing body of research indicates a significant and unacknowledged psychological cost (Adams and Rohde, 2011; Lei et al., 2020).Self-esteem, which can be described as the overall subjective assessment of worth, which an individual tends to place on themselves (Rosenberg, 1965), plays a crucial role as a psychological buffer Girls with low self-esteem are strongly related with the depressive symptoms, eating pathology, and health-risk behaviors, longitudinal patterns of low self-esteem reveal substantial continuity into adulthood (Barker, 2006). Self-esteem is complemented by trait emotional intelligence (EI) or the capacity to experience, act upon and control emotion both in others and oneself (Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Petrides, 2009) as having the capacity to adaptively relate to others. Combined, self-esteem and EI form one of the bases of development: self-esteem gives the teen self-worth, whereas EI helps him/her deal with external social pressures in an efficient way (Petrides et al., 2007). The gap in either sphere in left-behind girls can lead to a cascading effect, exposing the child to the risk of developing anxiety disorders, lesser relational functioning, and mental health problems in the long term (Muris and Meesters, 2014; Zhou et al., 2020). Recent research on global migration has continuously demonstrated that both constructs are undermined by a lengthy lack of parenting, and thus a culturally-based investigation is urgently required (Graham and Jordan, 2011; Adhikari et al., 2025; Cui et al., 2021). These outcomes are modulated by the socio-cultural factors as well in the context of India. Stigmatization and pathways of resource disadvantage due to father loss can be enhanced by caste hierarchies among low-caste girls (Deshpande, 2011). Hinduistic rural Bengal religious systems, mostly involve family duty and sacrifice that in some instances; alleviates emotional

suffering, whereas in other instances, it heightens guilt and role strain (Uberoi, 2005). Migrant families of first-generation learners traditionally experience such traumatic barriers of the intergenerational educational and emotional knowledge that interferes with the development of EI (Borooah and Iyer, 2005). The family structure is also important: joint families, which are prevalent in the rural West Bengal, might be a source of alternative emotional support and isolation relief, although the studies in this respect are inconclusive (Niranjan et al., 1998).

In India, there are few quantitative studies on self-esteem and trait emotional intelligence (specifically, ordinal categories of EI level), which may be conducted at large scale, even though mounting international and regional evidence indicates the opposite. Reviews across the globe have suggested the use of more culturally sensitive models, having found that the Western-origin measures (e.g., Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale) may not capture well the collectivistic self-construals which are common in South Asia (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Schutte et al., 2002).Although it has become a given in the international literature that father absence is a psychosocial risk factor (McLanahan et al., 2013; Fellmeth et al., 2 No quantitative study of this magnitude has so far been conducted in rural West Bengal, whereby the rates of migration have often reached or surpassed 25% (NSSO, 2019) differences in the outcome between self-esteem and ordinal categories of emotional intelligence left-behind adolescent girls not born left versus non-left even after controlling important socio-cultural confounders (caste, religion, generation of learner and family type). The current knowledge emphasizes the continued lack of knowledge about the gendered psychological impacts of parental migration in India among rural dwellers (Adhikari et al., 2025; Paul, 2025). This is a gap in evidence that limits the construction of evidence-based interventions aimed at serving one of the most at-risk adolescent groups in the country. This research attempts to fill these gaps by: The comparison of self-esteem differences between non-left circles and left circles of girls in the rural west Bengal. Assessing the predictive value of father absence (left-behind status) on belonging to the categories of emotional intelligence after controlling the socio-cultural confounding variables.3. Investigating the impact of these psychological patterns on the mental health of girls and the psychosocial evolution in the long run in contexts of rural Indian migration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This cross-sectional study employed a quantitative design to capture a snapshot of psychological outcomes at a single point, suitable for prevalence estimation and group comparisons in resource-constrained settings (Sedgwick, 2014). Cross-sectional approaches are prevalent in migration research for their feasibility, though causality inferences are limited (Wang et al., 2016).

Study Area

The research was conducted in a rural district of West Bengal, India i.e. Cooch Behar, characterized by high out-migration due to seasonal agricultural activity (Census of India, 2011). The district features low literacy (60-70% for females) and entrenched gender norms, amplifying migration's psychological impacts (NFHS-5, 2021).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Participants comprised 1,547 adolescent girls aged 12-18 years (M = 15.2, SD = 1.8), recruited via stratified purposive sampling from 63 schools and 4 colleges of the district. Stratification ensured representation across left-behind (n = 809, 52.3%) and non-left-behind (n = 738, 47.7%) groups, identified via school records of paternal occupation/residence. Additional strata included caste (General: 15.3%; OBC: 31.6%; SC: 53.1%), religion (Hindu: 72.9%; Muslim: 27.1%), generation of learner (First: 65%; Second: 35%), and family type (Nuclear: 14.4%; Joint: 85.6%). Inclusion criteria: Enrolled in grades 7-10, parental consent. Exclusion: Severe cognitive impairments. Power analysis (G*Power 3.1) indicated 80% power to detect medium effects (d = 0.5) at $\alpha = .05$ (Faul et al., 2007).

Measurement Tools

The scoring of self-esteem was done through Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), which is a 10-item Likert scale (1-4) questionnaire with high validity in adolescents ($\alpha = .79$). Showing scores of 10-40; the higher the score, the higher the self esteem.

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The measure of emotional intelligence was a 30 item self-report (1-7 Likert) scale, the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-short form (TEIQue-SF; Petrides, 2009), which provided a global trait score of EI. The participants were classified in tertiles Low (Group 1, 8.0%), Medium (Group 2, 79.1%), High (Group 3, 13.0%). The TEIQue-SF is reliable (r =.64).

Data Collection Procedure

The collected data encompassed a period of 6 months (January 2023- June 2023) conducted by trained women who could speak the Bengali language. In silent classrooms, which lasted 45 minutes, schools were used to deliver group administrations. The language accuracy of the tools was translated/back-translated (Brislin, 1970). Anonymous protection was provided through coded IDs; (98) percent response rate, and no data has been omitted even after probing.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Cooch Behar College. Informed assent/consent was secured from girls/guardians, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality (American Psychological Association, 2020). Sensitive topics were handled with on-site counselling referrals.

Statistical Analysis Methods

Analyses used SPSS Version 27. Demographics were summarised using descriptive statistics. The means of self-esteem were compared using independent samples t-tests and assuming that variances are unequal based on the test of Levene (Field, 2018). Ordinal logistic regression modelled EI groups (Dependent: TEI Group, ordinal), whereby the Category of Girls and confounders were used as the predictors (Link: logit). Fit of the model was measured through -2LL, chi-square, Hosmer-Lemeshow (Pearson/Deviance), and pseudo-R 2 (Nagelkerke). Significance: $p < .05$; 95% CIs reported. The following assumptions (multicollinearity VIF < 5; proportional odds) were checked.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The sample size (N = 1,547) was dominated by nuclear families (85.6%), first-generation learners (65.0%), and was represented by rural people. The left behind girls made 52.3 per cent as per the regional migration trends. The scores of self-esteems were between 10-40 (overall M = 23.70, SD = 4.55). There were skewed distributions of EI with no high or low populations, medium (79.1%), and low (8.0%). Table 1 shows marginal percentages.

Table 1 Case Processing Summary: Distribution of Key Variables (N = 1,547)

Variable	Category	N	Marginal %
TEI Group	1 (Low)	123	8.0
	2 (Medium)	1223	79.1
	3 (High)	201	13.0
Category of Girls	1 (Left-behind)	809	52.3
	2 (Non)	738	47.7
Caste	General	237	15.3
	OBC	489	31.6

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	SC	821	53.1
Religion	Hinu	1128	72.9
	Muslim	419	27.1
Generation of Learner	(First)	1006	65.0
	(Second)	541	35.0
Family Type	Joint	222	14.4
	Nuclear	1325	85.6

t-Test Results for Self-Esteem

Group statistics indicated lower self-esteem among left-behind girls (M = 22.93, SD = 4.25) versus non-left-behind (M = 24.56, SD = 4.77). Levene's test confirmed unequal variances (F = 16.187, p < .001). The t-test yielded t (1481.624) = -7.050, p < .001, with mean difference = -1.625 (95% CI: -2.077 to -1.173). Equal variances assumption: t (1545) = -7.088, p < .001. Effect size (Cohen's d = 0.36) suggests moderate practical significance.

Table 2 Independent Samples t-Test for Self-Esteem by Category of Girls

Group	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**t**	**df**	**p**	**Mean Diff**	**95% CI Lower**	**95% CI Upper**
Left-behind	809	22.93	4.25	-7.088	1545	<.001	-1.625	-2.074	-1.175
Non-left-behind	738	24.56	4.77						

Ordinal Logistic Regression Results for Emotional Intelligence

The intercept-only model (-2LL = 514.299) improved significantly in the final model (-2LL = 194.766; $\chi^2(6) = 319.533$, p < .001), indicating predictors enhanced EI prediction.

Goodness-of-fit tests affirmed model adequacy: Pearson $\chi^2(74) = 67.706$, p = .684; Deviance $\chi^2(74) = 62.877$, p = .818. Pseudo-R^2 values: Cox & Snell = .187; Nagelkerke = .256; McFadden = .158, denoting moderate explanatory power.

Parameter estimates (reference: Category of Girls = 2, Caste = 3, Religion = 2, Generation = 2, Family Type = 2) revealed only Category of Girls as significant. Left-behind status reduced odds of higher EI groups (β = -3.028, SE = .243, Wald = 154.997, p < .001; 95% CI: -3.505 to -2.551; OR = .048). Thresholds: TEI Group 1 (β = -4.377, p < .001); Group 2 (β = 1.520, p < .001). Other predictors were non-significant (ps > .126).

Table 3 Parameter Estimates from Ordinal Logistic Regression (N = 1,547)

Predictor	**β**	**SE**	**Wald**	**p**	**95% CI Lower**	**95% CI Upper**	**OR**
Threshold [TEI=1]	-4.377	.352	154.616	<.001	-5.067	-3.687	-
Threshold [TEI=2]	1.520	.275	30.542	<.001	.981	2.058	-
Category=1 (Left-behind)	-3.028	.243	154.997	<.001	-3.505	-2.551	.048

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Caste=1	-.002	.189	.000	.990	-.373	.368	.998
Caste=2	.244	.205	1.422	.233	-.157	.645	1.276
Religion=1	.321	.210	2.343	.126	-.090	.732	1.379
Generation=1	.187	.136	1.879	.170	-.080	.454	1.206
Family Type=1	.008	.181	.002	.966	-.348	.363	1.008

Interpretation of Findings

Left-behind girls exhibited significantly diminished self-esteem and lower likelihood of high EI, independent of socio-cultural factors. The regression model's strong fit and variance explained (25.6%) affirm father absence as a primary driver, with t-test confirming group disparities.

DISCUSSION

This paper casts light on the deep psychological tint of absence of parents on the rural West Bengal girls, in terms of lost self-esteem and EI. The strong effect of the t-test is consistent with the meta-analytic findings of moderate deficit of self-esteem in the presence of father absence (McLanahan et al., 2013). The means (22.93 vs. 24.56) of the sample are below the world adolescent mean (M 30; Rosenberg, 1965), which indicate clinical alarm in this group.

The ordinal regression also clarifies the presence of EI deficiency: The odds of girls who were left behind to fit in the higher EI categories decreased significantly (OR = 0.48), which suggests that the likelihood is reduced by 95 percent. This nominal method shows subtle gradients that cannot be acquired using continuous models, as the medium levels of EI dominance (79.1) indicate extensive subclinical impairment. No significance of confounders (e.g., caste p =.990) was surprising, which might be explained by sameness of the samples or even by counteracting effects of migration (Deshpande, 2011). The Nagelkerke R^2 (.256) indicates moderate utility, comparable to similar studies (Nguyen, 2016). Findings converge with global patterns: In a meta-analysis by Fellmeth et al., (2018), left-behind children were reported to have a 1.5-2-fold higher risks of depression, which are comparable to our gaps of self-esteem. Similar to the case in India, Antony and Joseph (2017) noted similar EI decreases in the Kerala migrants, which they attributed to the separation of attachment (Bowlby, 1988). Yet, we have non-significant socio-cultural influences that are not in agreement with Borooah and Iyer (2005), who created a connection between caste and educational EI proxies, which could be due to the joint family buffering in West Bengal (Niranjan et al., 1998), and this should be analyzed at subgroups.

Father absence, psychologically, leads to attachment insecurity thus affecting emotion control and self-esteem (Lamb, 2010). Girls who are left behind can create a sense of absence as an act of rejection and negative self-schemas (Orth & Robins, 2014). Gender social norms in the rural areas necessitate parentification, where a girl values siblings to self-development exhausting EI resources (Jurkovic, 1997). Remittances, despite being economically positive, do not replace paternal affirmation as they are reminiscent of "emotional poverty" in transnational families (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997).

Hindu-majority (72.9%) socio-cultural emphases on dharma might cause guilt, but there is kin support (85.6) which is not significant (Uberoi, 2005). The experience homogenisation of the caste in the rural Bengal could be due to insularity (Deshpande, 2011). These shortcomings have long-term threats: Low esteem in adulthood is a predictor of depression (Orth & Robins, 2014), and lack of good EI increases problems in relationships (Zeidner et al., 2008). In India, it may further widen the disparities in gender, where abandoned girls may likely be married off or may turn to school dropout (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2010). Interventions should be focused on EI skill-building and it should include mindfulness to reinforce the regulation (Keng et al., 2011). In the West Bengal rural setting, the results support school-based intervention using the joint family strengths to support peer EI training (Sahoo, 2019). Medical-wise, migration programs must require the virtual paternal contact, which is embracing the emotional gaps (Graham and Jordan, 2011). The absence can be de-stigmatized culturally through

dialogue sessions at the community level, which is consistent with the National Mental Health Programme (2022) in India.

CONCLUSION

In this research it has been clearly identified that father absence has a considerable negative impact on self-esteem; whereas left-behind status is found to hold the pre-eminent position regardless of the non-significant influences by the socio-cultural factors. The research suggests Psychological screening in the migration should be built in by policymakers, who should finance remittances-related family counselling (Fellmeth et al., 2018). In learning, deficits can be averted using curricula that promotes gender-equitable EI through inclusion of modules on RSES/TEIQue- SF. The rural clinics should focus on left-behind girls in order to be able to provide mental health care at very low costs, providing them with the group therapy that will restore their self-esteem (Muris and Meesters, 2014). Overall the study contributes towards important empirical evidence to the limites body of research on the gendered pshychological impacts of parental migration in rural India and emphasises the importance of supportive educational and community frameworks to safeguard the emotional development of left behind adolescent girls.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no competing interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Ethical Approval

The study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research. The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by **Ethics Committee of Cooch Behar College.**

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was entirely voluntary. It will be provided if required.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate declarations: applicable and addressed as above.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable.

Clinical Trial Registration

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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