



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 17 May 2026 | Accepted: 16 June 2026

Feminization of survival: Socioeconomic and health consequences of male absenteeism on left behind women in Nepal

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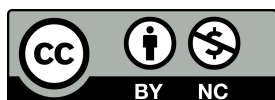
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To cite this paper

Khadka, S., Gajurel, R. P. (2026).
Feminization of survival:
Socioeconomic and health
consequences of male absenteeism
on left behind women in Nepal.
Economic Review of Nepal, 9(1),
1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/ern.v9i1.96135>



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Economic Review of Nepal,
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Abstract

Feminization of survival is not easy, particularly in a patriarchal society after connubial bereavement or male abandonment, facing several socioeconomic or health consequences. This study thus investigates the socioeconomic and health consequences of male absenteeism on the left behind women in Nepal. This study used cross-sectional data, following mixed research methods. This study employed a structured questionnaire for a purposefully selected 73 Nepali women and 3 Nepali women for in-depth face-to-face case study interviews to triangulate and complement the survey information. This study reported that most of the women were middle-aged, literate, Hindu, of rural origin, earned just an insufficient income, lacked basic needs facilities and comforts, had no land access, had a minimal chance of alternative jobs, limited community participation, and were lone survivors. The overall findings revealed that the left behind women faced several socio-economic and health consequences, including minimal family and kin support; feeling lonely and socially withdrawn; only a threshold income for basic needs but not sufficient for food, healthcare, and parenting; deprivation of comforts; loss of emotional support; and anticipation of financial privilege from in-laws and relatives. Thus, the policymakers and stakeholders should offer economic safety nets, mental health counselling services, social awareness and teachings for social stigma reduction, clear provision of property rights and obligatory cooperation of in-laws, social networking, and parenting support to minimize socioeconomic and health consequences.

Keywords

Feminization, patriarchal society, socioeconomic hardships, mental health, women's identity, Nepal

JEL Classification

C83, J16, K38

1 Introduction

For ages, a woman's individuality has remained in crisis. While a man is considered a complete and independent individual whose existence is justified by his work, a woman has to choose between love, marriage, and motherhood and her chance to reach her full potential and create her own identity (de Beauvoir, 1997; Friedan, 1965). Though women's participation in the labour and education markets has expanded, marriage and family obligations remain highly valued across society, occupying a central place in women's lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2005).

Marriage is highly revered due to a variety of reasons. Historically, in patriarchal societies, women have not been allowed property rights and economic power, not even the rights of dowries, making marriage the only source of security (Agarwal 1988; de Beauvoir, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988; Sharma 1980). Social norms, cultural expectations, and romanticized ideals frequently portray marriage as a natural progression to adulthood, associating it with security, stability, family formation, and personal fulfillment (Carter, 2012; Lewis, 2001). These patriarchal bargains are internalized through socialization and limit the rational choices of women (Kandiyoti, 1988). Consequently, marriage becomes intertwined with women's sense of identity, and when her marriage falls apart due to the husband's death, divorce, or abandonment, she loses a part of herself.

With male absenteeism, women face challenges in every aspect of their lives. The loss of a spouse has been identified as one of the most distressing life events and is associated with elevated levels of depression, anxiety, grief, and psychological distress (Bennett et al., 2005; Onrust & Cuijpers, 2006; Trivedi et al., 2009). Along with that, they may experience loneliness, diminished social support, and the loss of day-to-day companionship, further diminishing their mental health due to reduced social and emotional support (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Trivedi et al., 2009). In many South Asian contexts, the internal burden on women is further intensified by social stigma and cultural expectations that define and treat women based on their marital status (Pothen, 1986; Trivedi et al., 2009). Despite all those, a woman still has to rise for her own survival and that of her dependents.

Due to the demands of childcare, household management, and daily subsistence, women still have to return to their social and economic life. Remarriage can be of huge assistance, but there are unequal opportunities to remarriage to women, as women are subject to chastity and devotion (de Beauvoir, 1997; Malik, 2013). With the absence of the husband, women are deprived of the support of the principal breadwinner of the family (Fasoranti et al., 2007). Women have to become primary caregivers and wage earners for the family, along with the upbringing of the child and maintaining the previous standard of living with limited work experiences and resources (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009; Taylor & Conger, 2017). The burden of survival becomes central to women's lived realities, leading to the feminization of survival at a household level. And all these come with their own set of challenges to women – to their well-being, to their identity, and to their empowerment.

While existing research has documented the consequences of widowhood, divorce, and marital dissolution, particularly their mental and psychological effects, economic burden, and social stigma, these studies largely examine different forms of male absence and their consequences in isolation. Moving beyond fragmented approaches, this study adopts a holistic perspective in understanding the lived realities of left behind women through social, economic, and health consequences of male absenteeism. It extends the concept of feminization of survival by Sassen (2002) beyond its global structural framing and situates women's labour for survival within household-level realities. In doing so, the study critically explores the implications of survival labor on women's well-being, identity, and empowerment.

2 Literature Review

Marriage, Patriarchy, and Gendered Dependence

Marriage has historically been a source of women's social identity, economic security, and social legitimacy. de Beauvoir (1997) stated that a woman's existence and identity have been considered valid only through a husband's presence in her life. Through socialization, the patriarchal bargains have challenged the women's individuality even more (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Women's individualization was weakened by their economic dependence on their husbands, as women remained limited to domestic work and did not hold any property or inheritance (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2005; de Beauvoir, 1997). Kandiyoti (1988) argued that the patrilineal and patrilocal complex has always defined, limited, and inflected women's market and domestic options. Similar conditions can be seen in South Asian contexts where women face immense legal, historical, and cultural barriers to inheriting and owning land (Agarwal, 1994).

Marriage has been considered not only a natural progression into adult life but also the sole justification of women's existence (de Beauvoir, 1997; Lewis, 2001). Topping that off with the economic dependence of women on their husbands, in a patriarchal society, women's existence becomes incomplete without a husband.

Feminization of Survival

Sassen (2002) introduced the concept of the feminization of survival to describe the growing dependence of households, communities, and even national economies on women's labor for survival. In the context of economic restructuring, high unemployment, heavy government debt, and poverty, women assume the responsibility of sustaining households through formal, informal, and alternative circuits, creating a scenario of dependence even at the national level.

While Sassen (2002) primarily focuses on global economic processes, this concept is also useful in understanding household-level realities. In case of widowhood, divorcee and abandonment, male absenteeism becomes the reason women have to seek labor, and her labor becomes the source of survival for her children and family. Furthermore, her focus of analysis was on the rise of alternative circuits for system survival, whereas this study looks at the impact of such survival labor on women.

Survival Labor & Survival Strategies

Following male absenteeism, women become responsible for ensuring the survival of themselves and their dependents. Now, to meet these responsibilities, women need to undertake various survival strategies within the limited resources and constrained choices. Edin and Lein (1997) stated that low-skilled single mothers often have to make choices between welfare and work. They combine multiple work strategies as one income source is not enough for survival. Ramnarain (2015) points out that widows in Nepal often have to balance home and work responsibilities and even sell their assets for the welfare of their children and household. While these strategies enable women to sustain their households, they bring further economic, social, and health challenges.

Survival Agency & Empowerment

With male absenteeism, women often get active in the labour market. But such participation is shaped by necessity rather than genuine choice. It forms a constrained survival agency where women, especially the low-income ones, make decisions based on the limited structural options to ensure the survival of themselves and their dependents (Edin & Lein, 1997; Ramnarain, 2015). However, such exercise of agency does not necessarily lead to empowerment or improved social positioning. Women still need to tackle

practical challenges of living alone, face social vulnerabilities, and rely on external support networks in the course of their survival (Muhammed Jabir, 2017; Pothan, 1986; Trivedi et al., 2009). Furthermore, women's identities often remain socially mediated through their marital status and caregiving roles, particularly as mothers, widows, divorcees, and abandoned women rather than as autonomous individuals (Pothan, 1986; Trivedi et al., 2009; van den Hoonaard, 1997). Overall, this demonstrates that while women's labour participation increases, they remain structurally constrained, and therefore, it does not automatically translate into empowerment or independent identity formation.

Socioeconomic and Health Consequences of Male Absenteeism

The male absenteeism in women's lives can occur in different forms, but the ones observed in this paper are through widowhood, divorce, or abandonment. Although these occur in different circumstances, they often create similar forms of vulnerability, disrupting emotional, social, and economic support. Losing a spouse is one of the most difficult events in a person's life, leading to long-lasting psychological dysfunction with elevated anxiety, especially in the first year of loss (Onrust & Cuijpers, 2006; Trivedi et al., 2009). Divorcees too suffer from anxiety, depression, anger, feelings of incompetence, rejection, and loneliness, leaving a 'permanent strain' in their lives (Avison et al., 2007; Gahler, 2006; Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Deserted women also face similar emotional/psychological and socio-cultural problems (Muhammed Jabir, 2017).

The woman has to overwork for the well-being of her child and family (Gahler, 2002). Muhammed Jabir (2017) argued that even after engaging in daily-wage work, contract-based employment, or salaried jobs, their financial condition remains weak and pitiable. Another problem faced by the majority of widows, divorcees, and deserted women is financial burden. With the loss of only the breadwinner in most of the family, women experience task overload due to the custody of the children and still are unable to meet the basic survival needs (Fasoranti et al., 2007; Gahler, 2002; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Muhammed Jabir, 2017; Sevak, Weir, & Willis, 2003). Even after rigorous labour, the persistent economic challenges lead to poor nutrition, inadequate shelter, and lack of access to healthcare, further deteriorating their health conditions (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2001). There is a permanent strain left on a woman's mind after the loss or separation from her husband that haunts her throughout her lifelong journey of survival (Avison et al., 2007; Mastekaasa, 1995).

In many Asian contexts, widows are subject to negative stereotypes, social exclusion, and discriminatory cultural practices (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2001). With the loss of companionship and social stigma, widows and divorcees face the issue of guilt, remorse, and loneliness, and become socially unresponsive (Gahler 2006, Fasoranti et al., 2007, Trivedi et al., 2009). In such a scenario, unlike for men, remarriage remains a faraway option for women who are subjected to chastity and devotion despite separation from their husbands (de Beauvoir, 1997; Trivedi et al., 2009). Additionally, women often face reduced social support and shrinking social networks, which further limit their ability to cope with daily survival challenges (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Trivedi et al., 2009).

Moreover, in Nepal, the number of single women is substantially high, crossing two million in 2021, and the societal attitude and behavior towards them remain inappropriate, stigmatizing them and decreasing their overall quality of life (My Republica, 2023).

Taken together, the literature suggests that male absenteeism generates interconnected social, economic, and psychological vulnerabilities for women. Along with battling these, women are required to take responsibility for sustaining themselves and their dependents, making survival an immediate necessity rather than a choice. Overall, survival of feminization under conditions of male absenteeism produces layered economic, health, psychological, and social burdens, where women's participation in income-generating work does not necessarily translate into improved well-being but often reflects the necessity for survival.

3 Materials and Methods

Study Setting and Sampling

This study utilized mixed research methods for cross-sectional study. The single women separated from their husbands live elsewhere and are scattered in nature. So, fixing the location is a challenging task. Thus, this study employed a standardized questionnaire and collected data from an online survey of Nepali women by KoboToolbox for quantitative data and a case study of 3 respondents for qualitative data. The purpose of the study is to examine the socioeconomic and health consequences of male absenteeism from the perspective of feminized survival. The sampling scheme was homogeneous (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007), which included respondents based on their similarity and specific attributes. For a case study in-depth interview, Creswell (2002) emphasized 3-5 participants. Thus, using a non-random sampling technique, this study considered 73 respondents as the sample for quantitative data by employing a questionnaire and analyzed data by applying descriptive analysis. Likewise, 3 women were selected for a case study, conducting in-depth interviews with audio recording, for qualitative data, and placed after descriptive analysis in transcribed form to support and validate the quantitative survey results.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used primary data collected from different regions of the country, using KoboToolbox and face-to-face in-depth interviews with spouseless single women. Before collecting data, informed consent was taken from all participants to report their opinions anonymously. This study employed a structured questionnaire with 50 questions, covering demographics, current job status, causes of male absenteeism, socioeconomic consequences, and health consequences of male absenteeism. The questionnaire was anticipated to inquire about the hardship of sole survival from a feminized survival perspective. Additionally, the semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interview was performed to triangulate the information from survey methods. This study presented three participants. Participant 1 was 42-year woman married at 15 years and lived alone from 16 years of age with one son; however, her husband had another wife, of whom she was unaware. Furthermore, Participant 2 was 35 years old, married at 26, had two sons, and was separated from her husband due to an affair with another woman. Finally, Participant 3 was aged 47 with 1 son and daughter married at 17 years old, and had been staying alone from 19 years old due to an incompatibility issue.

This study used descriptive analysis, using the mean, standard deviations, percentages, tables, and charts for questionnaire survey information; moreover, case study methodology was applied to in-depth interview analysis by transcribing and thematizing as an objective of the study, so that the cases served as the triangulation and complement for the quantitative findings.

4 Results

Demographic and Socioeconomic Attributes of Participants

This study employed a survey questionnaire to collect data from 73 single women and conducted an in-depth case-study interview of 3 women. As shown in Table 1, out of 73 women, most of them were single because of their husbands' departure (57.5%), a few were divorced (13.7%), and the remaining (28.8%) were abandoned, thereby living alone without their husbands' support. Of the 73 women, most were aged 25 to 54 years (64.4%), and were just literate with below basic level education (64.4%). Similarly, 83.5% had children between 0 and 3; 52.1% were dwelled at rented place; and the majority belonged to the Brahmin/Chhetri (*Kshatriya*)¹ community (58.9%) and were Hindu (97.3%). Moreover, most of the respondents

¹ Brahmin/Chhetri (*Kshatriya*) communities are interdependent and superior among other verna, which share majority of population in Nepal (Dumont, 1980; National Statistics Office, 2021).

(63.0%) were of rural origin, occupation of agricultural and job (63%), and earned (39.7%) and spent (41.1%) below NRs. 10,000 per month with an average of Rs. 14878.77. Finally, most had no land ownership (52.1) and no membership in community groups (61.6%).

Table 1 Participants Attributes

Variables	Frequency (n = 73)	%	Variables	Frequency (n = 73)	%
Current marital status			Location of origin		
Married	21	28.8	Rural	46	63.0
Divorced	10	13.7	Urban	27	37.0
Departed with Husband	42	57.5	Occupation		
Age distribution (years)			Job	24	32.9
18 to 24	2	2.7	Business	22	30.1
25 to 54	47	64.4	Agriculture	26	35.6
55 to 64	12	16.4	None	1	1.4
65 to 90	12	16.4	Monthly income (NRs.)		
$\bar{x}$ and σ	49.18 $\pm$ 14.392		0 to 10000	29	39.7
Level of education			10001 to 20000	25	34.2
Below Basic Level	47	64.4	20001 to 30000	12	16.4
Primary	5	6.8	30001 to 40000	2	2.7
Secondary	14	19.2	> 40001	5	6.8
Tertiary	7	9.6	$\bar{x}$ and σ	16773.97 $\pm$ 13163.25	
Number of children			Monthly expenditure (NRs.)		
0 to 3	61	83.5	0 to 10000	30	41.1
4 to 6	12	16.5	10001 to 20000	25	34.2
Dwelling status			20001 to 30000	13	17.8
Rent	38	52.1	30001 to 40000	4	5.5
Own	33	45.2	> 40001	1	1.4
Relatives	2	2.7	$\bar{x}$ and σ	14878.77 $\pm$ 11286.96	
Ethnic/caste status			Land ownership		
Brahmin/ Chhetri	43	58.9	No	38	52.1
Aadibasi/Janajati	22	30.1	Yes	35	47.9
Dalit	7	9.6	Membership in community groups		
Other	1	1.4	No	45	61.6
Religious status			Yes	28	38.4
Hindu	71	97.3			
Non-Hindu	2	2.7			

Status of Male Absenteeism

The story behind the male absenteeism of respondents was not homogeneous in nature. Out of 73 respondents, only 2 (2.7%, 2/73) women were currently living with their husbands. The major reasons for not being with their husbands were his departure (60.3%) and living alone without divorce due to other reasons (23.3%). Most respondents reported that a limited period (1 to 10 years) of living with husbands (61.6%) averaged 11.51 years, and only a 5.5% was received financial support from their husbands (Table 2).

Table 2 Status of Male Absenteeism

Variables	Frequency (n = 73)	Percentage (%)
Currently living with husband		
No	71	97.3
Yes	2	2.7
Now with husband because		
Departed	44	60.3
Divorce	10	13.7
Living alone without divorce due to other reasons	17	23.3
Out migrate (City)	2	2.7

Variables	Frequency (n = 73)	Percentage (%)
Living with husband (year)		
1 to 10	45	61.6
11 to 20	15	20.5
21 to 30	10	13.7
31 to 40	1	1.4
> 40	2	2.7
Mean and standard deviation	11.51 ± 10.155	
Husband's financial support		
No	69	94.5
Yes	4	5.5

Current Job Status of Respondents

Feminization of survival remains a critical challenge for every woman abandoned or left behind by men in Nepalese society. As shown in Table 3, most of the women (93.2%) were reported to be involved in different types of work—fixed wage-related jobs (38.4%) and part-time jobs (54.8), where a few of them were still unemployed (6.8%). The results revealed that most of the employed women (76.7%) earned up to NRs. 20000 per month, and thus the average money income was NRs. 16773.97. Due to the household-job tradeoff, 98.6% women handled their household work, spending 1 to 5 hours per day on household work by the majority of them (75.3).

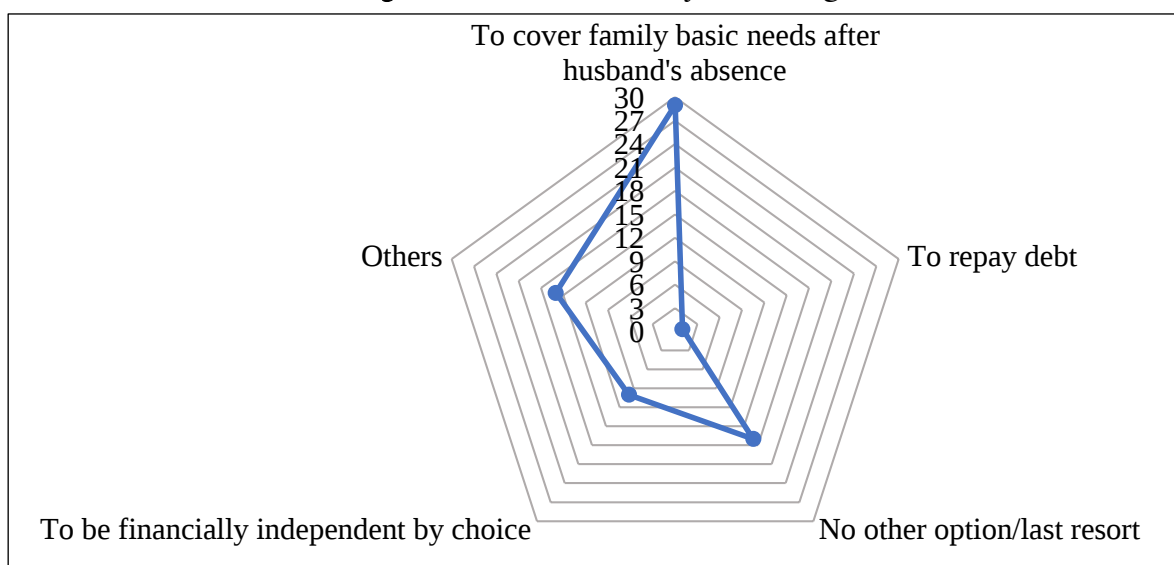
Table 3 Current Job Status

Variables	Frequency (n = 73)	Percentage (%)
Currently working status		
No	5	6.8
Yes	68	93.2
Nature of Job		
Fixed wage earner	28	38.4
Part time	40	54.8
None	5	6.8
If working, earning per month (Nrs.) (n = 68)		
3000 to 10000	31	42.5
10001 to 20000	25	34.2
20001 to 30000	7	9.6
30001 to 40000	1	1.4
40001 above	4	5.5
$\bar{x}$ and σ	16773.97 ± 13163.25	
Handling housework		
No	1	1.4
Yes	72	98.6
Time spent on housework		
1 to 5	55	75.3
5 to 10	18	24.7
Land access (Inheritance)		
No	43	58.9
Yes	30	41.1
Continuity of work, if all needs are covered		
No	24	32.9
Not sure	23	31.5
Yes	26	35.6
Alternatives before getting a job		
1–2 limited options	13	17.8
None	60	82.2

However, the majority of them had no land access (58.9%). Additionally, the majority of them (82.2%) had no chance of an alternative job, but a few of them got the opportunity of an alternative job before getting their current job. Moderately, 35.6% of women anticipated continuing to work, even if they would get financial support that would cover all the basic needs for survival. Furthermore, most of the women were involved in the work to cover the family's basic needs after the husband's absence and to take on the job as a last resort for survival (Figure 1). Regarding the current job, the participant expressed their hardship:

A 42-year-old participant (Participant 1) married at 16 stated that “Some days I feel fed up with 12 hours of work and additional household chores, but I have to work anyhow. If not, where to stay, what to eat, and how to raise my son.” Likewise, a 35-year-old young participant (Participant 2) wedded at 26, shared her experience as “I went abroad at 13 driven by the desire to have a standard life, but now I am confined to menial caregiving and sanitation work at school.” Additionally, participant 3, aged 47 years, expressed about the hardship of the job as “Even my children used to go with me to work at other people’s homes. It hurts me deeply to recall it—we grew up enduring so much hardship.”

Figure 1 The Main Reason for Working



Social Consequences of Male Absenteeism

This study classified the five broad areas of social problems, including family and kinship, social discrimination, social interaction, social support and networks, and status and prestige, with 18 consequences of social problems for all five categories. Each consequence among all 18 was arranged in ascending order based on its severity. Table 4 summarizes all the social consequences of male absenteeism.

Table 4 reports that most of the participants among all of the family and kinship-related social problems felt minimal unity and support from kin (46%) and worried about relationships with extended family members (28.7%); however, some of them were indifferent between pre- and post- situations. Regarding social discrimination, 42.1% participants experienced gossip, criticism, or social isolation due to male absenteeism; and being treated with pity or as a burden respectively. The remaining 15.8% were excluded from certain community activities or decision-making. Additionally, single women faced crucial problems of social interaction. 73.1% felt lonely or socially withdrawn after the absence of their husband, then experienced minimal interaction with neighbours and community members, and public exclusion in gatherings and commenting respectively. Moreover, with reference to social support and networks, it was observed that the majority of voting (77.9%) experienced a loss of emotional support during the crisis due to the male's absence, while a few others had a bitter reality of losing their circle of friends and well-wishers, as well as less access to information through social networks. Finally, regarding social status and prestige, participants faced a negative perception from neighbors or relatives (43.3%), which declined in the family's social status in the community, loss of respect and prestige in social gatherings.

Table 4 Social Consequences of Male Absenteeism

	Social consequences	Responses (n)	Responses (%)	Cases (%)	Intensity
Family and kinship	Worried about relationships with extended family members	25	28.7%	34.2%	7
	Increased dependency on relatives for help	7	8.0%	9.6%	17
	Reduced family unity or support from kin	40	46.0%	54.8%	3
	No difference in relationships	15	17.2%	20.5%	9
Social discrimination	Facing gossip, criticism, or social isolation due to male absenteeism	32	42.1%	45.1%	5
	Being treated with pity or as a burden	32	42.1%	45.1%	6
	Being excluded from certain community activities or decisions	12	15.8%	16.9%	12
Social interaction	Less interaction with neighbours and other community members	14	17.9%	20.0%	10
	Avoidance of public places or gatherings to escape questions or comments	7	9.0%	10.0%	16
	Feeling lonely or socially withdrawn	57	73.1%	81.4%	2
Social support and networks	Decrease circle of friends or well-wishers	12	15.6%	16.7%	13
	Less access to information or opportunities through social networks	5	6.5%	6.9%	18
	Loss of emotional support during crises	60	77.9%	83.3%	1
Status and prestige	Decline in family's social status in the community	19	21.1%	26.0%	8
	Negative perception from neighbours or relatives	39	43.3%	53.4%	4
	Loss of respect or prestige in social gatherings	8	8.9%	11.0%	15
	No difference in status and perception	13	14.4%	17.8%	11
	Others	11	12.2%	15.1%	14

Thus, comparing all the consequences, the loss of emotional support during crises were top of the severity than others, and other crucial social problems were: Reduced family unity or support from kin; facing gossip, criticism, or social isolation due to male absenteeism; feeling lonely or socially withdrawn; and negative perception from neighbours or relatives. In line with this, three participants concluded the social consequences of male absenteeism as:

Participant 1 said that she didn't go to her parents' home because of her own awkwardness. She handled herself and stood up on her own. She has had the same friends since the beginning of time. She wasn't even informed about the death of her husband by her in-laws, fearing her son would claim his father's property. She endured a sexual attack twice. Even while offering a small help man had bad hidden intentions. Similarly, Participant 2 experienced that without the support from her parental side, she would have been gone by now, and her children probably would have died as well. Her friends still insist her to let them know if she needs any help. Her husband's family asked her to return. But her husband says he does not like to see her face. With a husband like that, where would she bring money from if her children get sick? She often doesn't attend social gatherings and family functions. She feels out of place among them, as she can't meet their standards. Finally, Participant 3 felt that betrayed in an emergency when she asked her brother for help. He refused even though he was in a position to help. She felt humiliated and regretted asking for help. She has no close friends. She is all by herself. She has gone to her in-laws' place only once, so there is no chance of getting any support. She was supported by the family she used to work for, and she doesn't care what society has to say about her.

Economic Consequences of Male Absenteeism

Nepalese society is highly male-dominated and patriarchal in nature, thereby lacking economic freedom for women. This study identified eight crucial questions that had ample evidence of the economic consequences of male absenteeism. Table 5 reports the economic consequences of male absenteeism.

Table 5 *Economic Consequences of Male Absenteeism*

Economic consequences		Frequency (n = 73)	Percentage (%)
Spending of income earnings	Food stuff	22	30.1%
	Rent	22	30.1%
	Children's education	22	30.1%
	Health	7	9.6%
Adequacy of income for basic needs	No	56	76.7%
	Yes	17	23.3%
Shortage of food, healthcare, or children's education	No	12	16.4%
	Yes	61	83.6%
Borrowing for the income gap	No	26	35.6%
	Yes	47	64.4%
Current debt	No	30	41.1%
	Yes	43	58.9%
Ability to save	No	56	76.7%
	Yes	17	23.3%
Enough money for comfort (clothes, travel, gadgets, etc.)	No	61	83.6%
	Yes	12	16.4%
Decision maker for spending	Others decide (in-laws/husband/relatives)	7	9.6%
	Shared decisions	12	16.4%
	I decide mostly	54	74.0%

As shown in the results of Table 5, most of the women spent their monthly income equally (30.1%) on foodstuffs, rent, and children, where only a small portion of them spent on health (.6%) due to limited average income. Similarly, 76.7% women perceived an inadequacy of income for basic needs, thereby 83.6% of women experienced a shortage of food, healthcare, or children's education. Due to limited saving capacity (23.3%), 64.4% were intended to fill the income and expenditure gap by borrowing, and thus, 58.9% had a loan burden currently. Moreover, the majority of the single women (83.6%) did not have enough money for their comfort, such as clothes, travel, gadgets, etc. So, they carefully managed and decided on their income for spending. 74% were made a self-decision to spend their income, and 16.4% were shared decision about spending the money. In addition to the results of Table 5, the participants shared their economic hardship due to male absenteeism as:

Participant 1 revealed that my earnings barely meet the needs. It's hard.... really hard. Participant 2 expressed that I covered the pregnancy complications and delivery by selling my gold. The most painful moment was when my child fell sick. I went to him, tears in my eyes, asking for money for treatment, and he refused to help me. And finally, participant 3 had experienced that the first half of the month after getting paid was fine. In the second half, I always ended up borrowing money to get through.

Health Consequences of Male Absenteeism

Health consequences are crucial, along with the socioeconomic challenges of male absenteeism. This study covers both the mental and physical health impact of feminized survival. Using the checklists and multiple-choice questions for identifying mental and physical health-related hardship, this study found crucial health challenges of participants. Tables 6 and 7 summarize these consequences.

Table 6 *Health Consequences of Male Absenteeism*

Health consequences		Frequency (n = 73)	Percentage (%)
Feeling overloaded in daily work	No	25	34.2%
	Yes	48	65.8%
Skipping medical treatment	No	21	28.8%
	Yes	52	71.2%
Feeling stressed or overwhelmed	Sometimes	19	26.0%
	Often	27	37.0%
	Always	27	37.0%
Feeling of suicidal	No	44	60.3%
	Yes	29	39.7%
Enjoyment of work	No	32	43.8%
	Yes	41	56.2%
Feeling respect or value in the work	No	31	42.5%
	Yes	42	57.5%
Experiencing uncomfortable and unsafe behavior without the husband in the household	No	43	58.9%
	Yes	30	41.1%

Table 6 reveals that 65.8% of women perceived their daily work as a burden, and 71.2% were skipping their medical treatment due to financial constraints. Moreover, most of the respondents (74%) were often stressed and overwhelmed, and others 19% were felt stressed sometimes. Nearly 39.7% single women thought about suicide due to the male absent in their lives; therefore, many of them (56.2%) enjoyed their work and were happy for sole survival. At the workplace, participants (57.5%) were valued and venerated by the institution as well as workmates; however, few of them (41.1%) had experienced uncomfortable and unsafe behavior without the husband in the household.

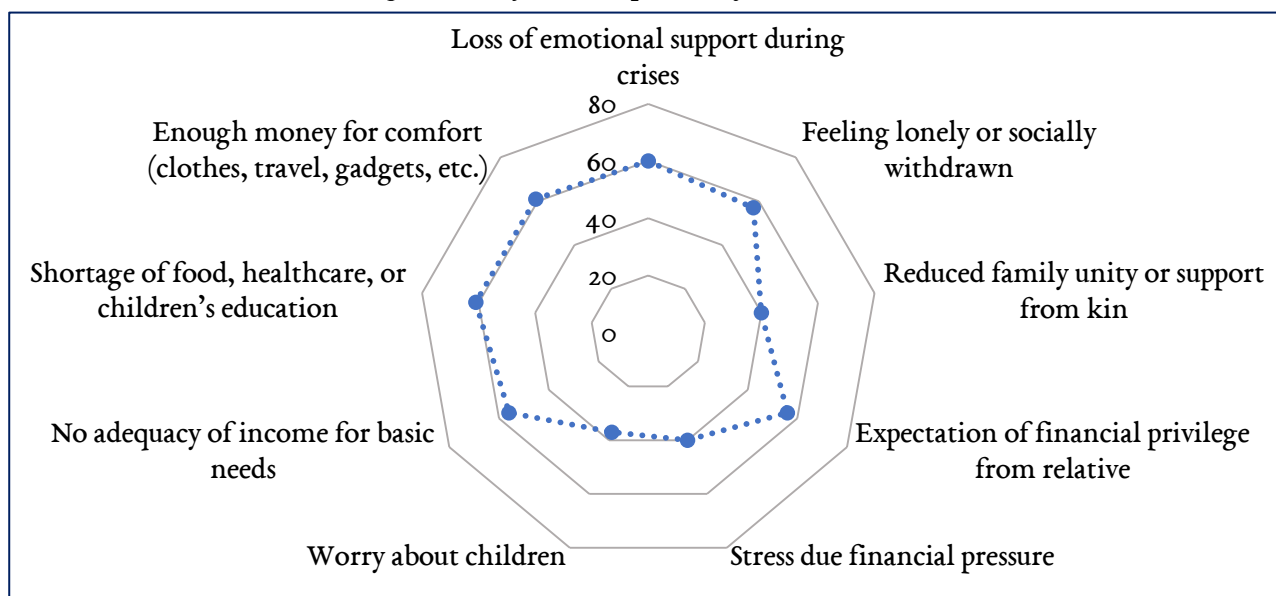
Table 7 *Multiple Responses on Health Impacts*

Health impact		Responses (n)	Responses (%)	Cases (%)
Health issues	Headache and dizziness	13	13.0%	17.8%
	Body pain	22	22.0%	30.1%
	Poor sleep	22	22.0%	30.1%
	Female-specific health issues (e.g., reproductive, gynecological)	9	9.0%	12.3%
	Others	34	34.0%	46.6%
Causes of stress	Financial pressure	40	33.9%	54.8%
	Workload	3	2.5%	4.1%
	Worry about children	37	31.4%	50.7%
	Lack of support	8	6.8%	11.0%
	Uncertainty of the future	17	14.4%	23.3%
	Health problems	9	7.6%	12.3%
	Other	4	3.4%	5.5%
Feeling sharing	Mother	18	19.6%	24.7%
	Father	7	7.6%	9.6%
	Neighbors	10	10.9%	13.7%
	Relatives	10	10.9%	13.7%
	Friends	13	14.1%	17.8%
	Relatives of husband	2	2.2%	2.7%
	Other	8	8.7%	11.0%
	None	24	26.1%	32.9%
Kinds of help	Financial privilege	56	56.6%	76.7%
	Social support	14	14.1%	19.2%
	Family reunion	11	11.1%	15.1%
	Remarriage	1	1.0%	1.4%
	Moral support	15	15.2%	20.5%
	Other	2	2.0%	2.7%

Table 7 shows the four broad categories for health consequences with a standardized set of multiple options. Most of the women (46.6%) mentioned that they suffered from other health issues along with poor sleep, body pain, headache and dizziness, and female-specific health issues (e.g., reproductive, gynecological). It is observed that they were often stressed due to financial pressures (54.8%), due to worry about the future of children (50.7%), and uncertainty of the future (23.3%), along with other causes: work overload, lack of support, and health problems. Because of feelings of loneliness and stress, most of the women wished to share their feelings with no one else (32.9%), but anticipated with their mother (24.7%), neighbours (13.7%), relatives (13.7%), friends (17.8%), father (9.6%), respectively. Therefore, most of the women (76.7%) needed financial privilege, moral support (20.5%), social support (19.2%), and family reunion (15.1%). On the flip side, three participants expressed their health consequences as

Participant 1 believed that the mind does not work; one can't sleep at all, has headaches, eyes burn, and the whole body feels tired. She even thought of suicide, but she held herself strong for her son due to the absence of her husband. Similarly, according to Participant 2, her pregnancy had complications, and the scar from the delivery still gets infected. It heals for 2-3 months, then flares up again. Her hand was fractured in two places when her husband hit her with a stick. She sometimes feels that once her sons are 10/11 years old, it would be okay if she were no longer alive. Sleepless nights and constant stress have taken a toll on her body. She feels weak, her face has aged, and her hair has begun to turn white. Moreover, Participant 3 stated that even when she was unwell, she had to work, and it often made her cry.

Figure 2 Major Consequences of Male Absenteeism



All in all, comparing all socioeconomics and health consequences, Figure 2 revealed that the intensified consequences male absenteeism in descending order were shortage of food, healthcare, or children's education; enough money for comfort (clothes, travel, gadgets, etc.); loss of emotional support during crises; feeling lonely or socially withdrawn; expectation of financial privilege from relatives; no adequacy of income for basic needs, reduced family unity or support from kin, stress due financial pressure, and worry about children.

5 Discussion

This study investigated the socioeconomic and health consequences of male absenteeism by representing 73 single women separated from husbands aged 25 to 54 from different geographical areas of Nepal. Additionally, this study conducted in-depth interviews of three women to triangulate the survey results. Most of the women were literate, lived in rented accommodation with a maximum of 3 children, were Hindu brahmins/chhetris from rural areas, engaged in agriculture, had an average monthly income below Rs. 10000 (\$65.26 at current exchange), and had no landholding or community participation. Major causes

of male absenteeism were their husbands' departure, with an average of 11.5 years living together with husbands and getting limited financial support. Most of the women engaged in part-time work earned just survival income (average of Rs. 16773.97 per month) along with household management due to male absenteeism. Moreover, the results also showed that the majority of women lacked land access and had no chance of an alternative job, and only some of them wished to continue their job if they got financial support for basic needs. Additionally, most of the women were employed to meet basic survival needs and had only limited options for managing daily expenses and achieving financial independence.

The results of social consequences revealed that family unity and support were the crucial detrimental effects that hindered social adjustment after male absenteeism, so they worried about healthy family relations (Hiew, 1992), but some felt no differences. Moreover, a few of them were supported by their relatives. In Nepalese society, the majority of the family is a male-headed gendered hierarchy with extra privileges, patriarchal in nature, and has no accommodative attitude towards women's independence, which impedes the family- and kinship-based adjustment after a partner's absence (Acharya et al., 2023; Uprety, 2024). On the other hand, beyond coital relations, couples' cohabitation makes their life secure and can tackle any social hardship. Thus, after conjugal bereavement, the results found that women faced several social discriminatory attitudes, including gossip, criticism, and social isolation, as well as society treated them as pitied or as a burden, and somewhat they were excluded from community participation (Dahal et al., 2023). Where, spousal bereavement is the stage where the most emotional support from friends, family and society is required, women are pitied upon, taken as a burden, hated and stigmatized by the tag of single woman causing them to isolate themselves bringing further challenges to their social survival.

Regarding further social consequences, the study also identified that women felt lonely, socially withdrawn, and had limited social interaction due to their spousal departure or abandonment, whereas some of them interacted less with neighbors and avoided public places to escape from critical comments (Freak-Poli et al., 2022; Niino et al., 2025). The reasons behind such social stigma loops are the results of stereotyped and prejudiced mentality and limited kin support in a rudimentary society. Further, this study revealed that almost two-thirds of women were broken emotionally during a crisis (Houston et al., 2016), and a few of them lost their friend circles and well-wishers, as well as an asymmetric position in social networks (Breen & O'Connor, 2011; Ikram & Usman, 2022; Morigan et al., 2011). Therefore, women will require social network support and an intervention program to build morale. On the flip side, according to the results, women always suffered from the negativity of neighbors or relatives and loss of social status and prestige in the community, but depended on in-laws' surveillance (Ahmed, 2020; Hussain et al., 2023), whereas only a few women were indifferent pre- and post-spousal absence. Once a woman is married, she considers herself a burden to her maternal home and she has troubled relations with her in-laws after husband's absenteeism in most of the cases. Hence, social intervention becomes necessary for her well-being.

With references to economic consequences, this study provided ample evidence of the economic hardship of lone-surviving women. Economically, they faced crucial challenges for basic subsistence and underwent privation, thereby spending almost their whole income on food, rent, and children's education. Therefore, feminized survival was more tough because of a shortage of food, healthcare, or children's education (Stack & Meredith, 2018), implying that male absenteeism might have a higher workload along with household duties and parenting, and a limited chance of empowerment (Doss, et al., 2022). The results also revealed that most of the women borrowed a loan to plug the gap between income and expenditure, thereby currently having a loan that showed a limited chance to save their income (Mohd Hashim et al., 2015). It was observed that more than two-thirds of women were deprived of life comforts and indulgences, such as clothes, travel, gadgets, and so on (Cruz et al., 2024). Furthermore, the result indicated that women spent their income cautiously and preferentially because of a paucity of sufficient budget for their extravagance; consequently, male separation might cause multifaceted vulnerability of women's lives (Vo et al., 2023; Wu & Ye, 2016). With only her child(ren) as her support or her children

having only her as their support, economic challenges are massive and almost never enough for the well-being of the child and the mother.

In many cases of health consequences, the results of the study reported that male absenteeism created physical and mental health challenges for women left behind. The result revealed that most of the women were overloaded in their daily work, skipped medical treatment, were stressed and overwhelmed, and experienced discomfort in the household after the male absence. In line with previous studies (Kim & Kim, 2016; Sarfaraz & Ali, 2025; Ullah et al., 2021), the left behind women have severe physical and mental health issues and have an initial stage of depression. Moreover, some women thought about suicide, resulting in a deterioration of their quality of life (Kim & Kim, 2020; Stack & Meredith, 2018); however, the majority of them felt respect and enjoyment in their job, even after their husbands' absence, which implied that educated beings may be indifferent about left behind women. Likewise, the results indicated that most of the separated women suffered from body pain and poor sleep, along with headache, dizziness, and female-specific health problems; conversely, among all of them, they suffered from several other health issues, offering similar evidence to the empirical findings of health problems of divorced women (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024). Similarly, the results also demonstrated that financial pressure was a crucial factor in stress after male absence, along with parenting, uncertain future, health problems, lack of support, and workload, which is supported by many past studies (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024; McDonnell & Gracia, 2024). Due to mental chaos, the results implied that most of the left behind women wished to share their feelings with no one, but a few of them wanted to share with their mother, friends, neighbors, relatives, others, father, and in-laws respectively. It takes a huge toll on the mental health of an individual who is already going through a lot. In line with past studies (Alsarve, 2020; Jacobson et al., 2017), the results concluded that more than two-third of women were in need of financial privilege, and a few of them required moral support, social support, family reunion, and remarriage, respectively, for their healthy life journey.

Beyond the socio-economic and health consequences, the findings also raise important questions on women's identity and empowerment. Though women enter income-generating activities following male absenteeism, it's because of the need for the survival of herself and her dependents. Although the endless labor and sacrifices show a woman's resilience, women continue to struggle with inadequate income, debt, dependency, and physical and psychological strain, which rarely translates to women's empowerment. Furthermore, their identities remain largely defined through the absence of males in their lives and their caregiving roles as widows, divorcees, abandoned women, and mothers, and rarely their individual selves. The findings thus suggest that labor participation alone should not be considered as empowerment where women remain structurally constrained.

6 Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the socio-economic and health consequences of male absenteeism on left behind women. Including 73 respondents for the questionnaire survey and 3 in-depth case study interviews, this study found severe vulnerability after a spousal bereavement. This study found that most of the women were middle-aged, literate, Hindu, of rural origin, had a maximum of 3 children, earned just an insufficient income, lacked basic needs facilities and comforts, had no land access, had a minimal chance of alternative jobs, limited community participation, and were lone survivors. These findings implied that most of the left behind women might face a basic survival crisis and have an arduous journey of financial sustainability. Socially, the results indicated that most of the women were punished by family or kin support as well as problematic family reunions, were being socially excluded and taken as burdensome with unjust gossiping, felt lonely due to limited family and kin circle and social interaction, lost emotional support, and were stigmatized by negative perception of relatives as well as in-laws and deteriorating social status. The results further revealed that the left behind women were economically vulnerable due to inadequate income; to spend their whole income on foodstuffs, rent, and parenting; to be short of

necessities, to rely on debt for the narrowing income-expenditure gap, to have a minimal chance of saving, to lose comfort, and to penny-pinching with self-discretion.

Furthermore, after a connubial separation, most of the women faced physical and mental health problems, so some of them had suicidal thoughts. Most of them had work-related strains, many had skipped their medical treatment, and were frequently stressed and overwhelmed; however, a few of them enjoyed their work and were valued in the workplace, and experienced comfortable cohabitation with in-laws after the male absence. Additionally, the results confirmed that most of the women had body pain, poor sleep, and headaches after being alone without husbands. Further, the results also revealed that many single women were stressed mainly from financial pressure, parenting children, and future uncertainty. Indeed, the results also implied that many of the women had a problem with the early stage of depression, which is why they wished to share their feelings with no one, but some of them were willing to talk with their mother, friends, neighbors, and relatives; and in addition to it, most of them anticipated financial, social, moral, and family support.

All in all, the overall findings showed that the left behind women faced several socio-economic and health consequences, including minimal family and kin support; feeling lonely and socially withdrawn; only a threshold income for basic needs but sufficient for food, healthcare, and parenting; deprivation of comforts; loss of emotional support; and anticipation of financial privilege from in-laws and relatives. Thus, the policymakers and stakeholders should offer economic safety nets for economic hardship, mental health counselling services, social awareness and teachings for social stigma reduction, clear provision of property rights and obligatory cooperation of in-laws, awareness for premature congeal relations, and parenting support for parenthood burden for mental well-being, social networking, and financial sustainability of left behind women after the bereavement.

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