# Parental Uncertainty and Unmet Support Needs among Elderly Left Behind by Migrating Children: A Study from Kerala, India

**Dennis Reji**

**ORCID: 0009-0006-2632-2560**

**Department of Social Work, Christ University, Bangalore, India**

**Sudha Thomas**

**ORCID: 0000-0002-5178-6483**

**Department of Social Work, Christ University, Bangalore, India**

## ABSTRACT

Background: Kerala is experiencing rapid youth out-migration, leaving a growing number of elderly parents without co-resident children. While the broad effects of this migration on parental well-being have been studied, two dimensions remain largely unexplored: the psychological burden of uncertainty about whether migrating children will return, and the gap between the support elderly parents currently receive and what they report needing.

Methods: An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected from elderly participants across Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta districts using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and WHOQOL-BREF. Qualitative data came from open-ended in-depth interviews with purposively selected participants. One-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey correction compared well-being scores across three subgroups defined by children's return intentions. Open-ended responses were coded using Bradshaw's (1972) needs taxonomy to map the gap between received and desired support.

Results: Participants whose children's future plans were 'undecided' reported significantly lower psychological well-being than those whose children either planned to return soon or to remain abroad permanently ($F(2, 69) = 4.31$, $p = 0.017$; Cohen's $d = 0.68$ vs return group). Critically, the undecided group scored lower even than those with confirmed long-term absence, indicating that not knowing is more distressing than knowing. A structured needs-gap analysis identified the largest shortfalls in psychosocial and emotional support (+39 percentage points), financial security (+36 pp), and structured social engagement (+24 pp). Qualitative findings characterised the

experience of uncertainty as ‘waiting without a horizon’, a state of chronic suspended readiness that prevents psychological adjustment.

Conclusions: Uncertainty about a child’s return is an independent psychological stressor that existing migration research and welfare policy have inadequately recognised. Unmet needs cluster in the emotional and relational domains rather than the practical ones. The recently established Kerala State Elderly Commission (2025) provides a significant policy window for targeted interventions, including community counselling, peer support groups, and digital inclusion programmes.

Keywords: elderly well-being; youth migration; parental uncertainty; ambiguous loss; unmet needs; WHOQOL-BREF; WHO-5; Kerala; left-behind elderly; social support

## 1. Introduction

Kerala is one of India’s most demographically distinct states, not merely because it developed early, but because it is now ageing faster than almost anywhere else in the country. According to the India Ageing Report 2023, 16.5% of Kerala’s population is already above the age of 60, a figure projected to reach 22.8% by 2036 (UNFPA India, 2023). The total fertility rate has fallen to 1.35, well below replacement level, while female life expectancy has reached 78.4 years (Kerala Social Justice Department, 2025). Against this backdrop, large-scale youth migration, for education, employment, and marriage, has become a defining feature of everyday family life. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 documents over 2.1 million Keralites currently residing abroad, with remittances forming a substantial portion of household income in migrant-sending districts (Rajan & Zachariah, 2023).

The intersection of rapid ageing and sustained out-migration has produced a growing cohort of elderly parents who live without their children nearby. Many reside alone or with only a spouse, rely on irregular financial transfers, and navigate health emergencies and daily routines without immediate family support. A recent qualitative study of older adults in Kerala’s migrant households found that elderly parents experience not only practical care deficits but profound emotional deprivation , a sense of being present in a household that no longer functions as a family (Mohan et al., 2025). Recognition of this problem has now reached the legislative level: in early 2025, the Kerala Assembly passed the Kerala State Elderly Commission Act, 2025, establishing India’s first statutory commission for the welfare and protection of senior citizens (The Print, 2025). Kerala Government also created a India’s first dedicated department for Senior Citizens welfare to address the states rapidly aging demographic and coordinate fragmented welfare, healthcare and palliative care. (Government of Kerala, *G.O. (Ms) No. 63/2026/GAD)*

Despite this growing body of evidence, migration research on elderly well-being has concentrated overwhelmingly on two variables: how long children have been away and how far they have gone. These are important, but they do not capture something that many elderly parents describe as their

most pressing concern, the condition of not knowing. When a child's future plans remain undecided, the elderly parent cannot mourn the departure, adjust their expectations for old age, or settle into a new daily rhythm. They live in a state of sustained anticipatory waiting that is psychologically distinct from confirmed long-term separation. Boss (1999, 2006) described this as ambiguous loss, a form of grief that resists resolution precisely because the loss itself is unconfirmed. Although recent concept analyses have extended this framework to ageing migrants (Al-Hamad et al., 2025), it has not been applied to the specific situation of elderly parents awaiting undecided migrant children in India.

A second gap in the literature concerns the structure of unmet support needs. Studies consistently document that elderly parents in migrant households receive inadequate support, but they rarely distinguish systematically between what people actually receive and what they say they need. Practical support, help with transport, food, or household tasks, is the form most commonly provided by community and extended family networks. But emotional support, financial security, and structured social engagement are what elderly parents most frequently describe as missing. Without a domain-specific needs-gap analysis grounded in participant-reported data, it remains difficult for practitioners and policymakers to know which areas to prioritise.

This study uses data from a broader mixed-methods investigation into youth migration and elderly well-being in central Kerala (Reji & Thomas, 2026) to address two specific questions not examined in that prior work: (1) How does the nature of children's return intentions, particularly sustained uncertainty, affect elderly parents' psychological well-being? (2) What are the unmet support needs of elderly parents in migrant-sending households, and where are the largest gaps between what they receive and what they need?

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Left-Behind Elderly: What We Know

Research on elderly parents left behind by migrant children has grown substantially since the early 2000s, driven by large-scale migration from South Asia, East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. In China, studies consistently document elevated rates of depression, reduced physical activity, worsening chronic illness management, and increased dependence on community members among elderly whose adult children have migrated to cities (Zhang et al., 2022). While remittances from migrant children partially buffer economic hardship, they do not offset the negative effect on parental subjective well-being (Li & Chen, 2023). In Nepal and Bangladesh, comparable patterns have emerged, with elderly parents reporting feelings of abandonment, diminished purpose, and a loss of identity as caregivers , a role that had previously defined their social standing (Ghimire et al., 2018; Rai & Dangal, 2021).

In India, the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) has provided national-level evidence that older adults with migrant sons are less likely to participate in the labour force, reflecting partial

financial compensation through remittances but also the weakening of traditional family support structures (Mandal et al., 2025). In Kerala specifically, Rajan et al. (2020) provided one of the first systematic accounts of the ageing challenge in migrant-sending districts, highlighting the inadequacy of formal care relative to the scale of need. More recently, Mohan et al. (2025) conducted qualitative research with twenty older adults living alone in Kerala's migrant households, finding that emotional deprivation, not functional disability, was the primary driver of vulnerability. Despite this growing literature, migration is treated primarily as a binary condition: children have left or they have not. The psychological dimension of how elderly parents experience different types of departure, particularly confirmed long-term absence versus ongoing uncertainty, has received no systematic empirical attention.

### 2.2 Parental Uncertainty: The Gap in the Literature

When adult children migrate, elderly parents occupy one of three psychological situations depending on whether children's future plans are clear. Some parents know their children plan to return; they can maintain a sense of temporal closure. Others know their children intend to remain abroad permanently; this is painful, but it permits gradual adjustment. A third group, which this study's data suggests may be the largest, live with children whose plans are genuinely uncertain. These parents cannot make decisions about living arrangements, healthcare planning, or social commitments without knowing whether their children will eventually be nearby. They exist in a state of ongoing readiness that prevents emotional rest.

Pauline Boss's (1999, 2006) concept of ambiguous loss provides the most direct theoretical framework. Boss distinguishes situations where a person is physically absent but psychologically present, the person is alive and known to be elsewhere, and the ambiguity arising from unresolved separation. In both cases, the defining feature is that ordinary grief cannot proceed because the loss has not been definitively established. The parent cannot mourn, adapt, or reorganise their sense of self around a permanent new reality. Al-Hamad et al. (2025), in a recent concept analysis of ambiguous loss among ageing migrants, confirm that this frozen grief operates through disruptions to belonging, identity, and continuity , dimensions that map directly onto what elderly parents in Kerala describe in qualitative interviews.

A complementary account comes from research on intolerance of uncertainty. Dugas et al. (2004) proposed that intolerance of uncertainty, the tendency to find not-knowing aversive, is a trans-diagnostic risk factor for anxiety and depression, independent of the actual probability of negative outcomes. Recent work confirms this relationship across diverse populations and conditions (Morriss et al., 2024; Näsling et al., 2024). Individuals who cannot easily tolerate uncertainty engage in chronic worry, hyper-vigilance, and behavioural avoidance, patterns that erode well-being even in the absence of any actual negative event. Among elderly people, whose cognitive flexibility and social resources may be reduced, sustained intolerance of uncertainty is likely to be

especially consequential. Yet this framework has not been applied to elderly parents waiting for undecided migrant children.

### 2.3 Unmet Needs among Elderly in Migrant Households

The concept of unmet need has a long and productive history in social welfare research. Bradshaw's (1972) foundational taxonomy distinguishes between normative need (defined by professional standards), felt need (what individuals identify for themselves), expressed need (felt need translated into service demand), and comparative need (identified through comparison with similar others). In gerontological practice, the distinction between felt and expressed need on the one hand, and met need on the other, provides the basis for assessing whether existing services are actually reaching those who require them (Wenger, 1984).

For elderly parents in migrant households, the unmet needs literature has largely taken a qualitative form: accounts of loneliness, health management difficulties, and financial anxiety. What is less common is a systematic, data-driven comparison across specific domains, a structured needs-gap analysis that maps where the gap between received and desired support is largest, enabling prioritisation of responses. Mohan et al. (2025) represent a recent contribution, documenting both practical and emotional care gaps qualitatively, but they do not produce a domain-level gap matrix that could inform policy design. This study fills that gap by combining open-ended responses about current support and additional support desired, coding both systematically, and producing a quantified needs-gap matrix across five domains.

### 2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three theoretical traditions. Ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2006) frames the psychological condition of elderly parents whose children's return is uncertain, situating their distress within a well-established account of grief that resists resolution. The intolerance of uncertainty model (Dugas et al., 2004; Morriss et al., 2024) provides a complementary psychological mechanism explaining how uncertainty itself, independent of eventual outcomes, generates chronic worry and reduced well-being. Bradshaw's (1972) needs taxonomy, combined with person-centred care principles (McCormack & McCance, 2010), frames the unmet needs analysis, emphasising participant-defined needs over professionally assumed categories. Together, these frameworks allow the study to examine two distinct but related phenomena: the psychological burden of not-knowing, and the practical and relational gaps in support available to those carrying that burden.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this design, quantitative data are collected and analysed first; qualitative data are then used to explain and contextualise the quantitative findings. This sequencing is appropriate here because the statistical patterns, particularly the lower well-being scores in the 'undecided' group, require experiential explanation that numbers alone cannot provide. The qualitative component addresses why uncertainty is distressing, what it looks like in daily life, and how it differs from confirmed separation. This design is distinguished from the broader mixed-methods study reported in Reji and Thomas (2026) by its specific focus on uncertainty as an independent variable and on the needs-gap as an outcome measure, neither of which featured in the prior publication.

### 3.2 Setting and Participants

Data were collected across three central Kerala districts, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta, all of which have sustained high rates of youth out-migration over multiple decades. Purposive sampling identified elderly individuals aged 50 and above with at least one child who had migrated abroad or to another Indian state. A total of 72 participants completed the quantitative instruments. This sample size is consistent with prior community-based studies using WHOQOL-BREF and WHO-5 among elderly populations in South Asia, which have used samples of 50–100 to detect medium effect sizes in group comparisons (Ghimire et al., 2018). Five participants were subsequently selected for in-depth qualitative interviews based on the richness of their open-ended survey responses and diversity in terms of living arrangements, migration context, and gender. Thematic saturation was reached after the fourth interview, confirming adequacy of the qualitative sample within this explanatory design.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using the WHOQOL-BREF, a 26-item WHO-developed instrument assessing quality of life across four domains: Physical Health, Psychological Health, Social Relationships, and Environment. The WHO-5 Well-Being Index, a five-item measure of subjective psychological well-being, was used alongside it. Both have been extensively validated for use with elderly populations in South Asian settings (WHOQOL Group, 1998). A structured background questionnaire gathered demographic data (age, gender, marital status, education, living arrangements, income source) and migration-context data (number of children abroad, duration of separation, reason for migration, and children's stated future return plans).

Qualitative data were collected through four open-ended questions: (1) How has youth migration in your family affected your daily life? (2) What are the biggest challenges you face because of your children's migration? (3) What support do you currently receive from your community or

social networks? (4) What additional support would improve your quality of life? Five participants provided in-depth interview data, conducted in Malayalam and transcribed and back-translated for analysis.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using Jamovi (version 2.4). One-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey correction was used to compare WHO-5 and WHOQOL-BREF domain scores across three subgroups defined by children's stated future plans: planning to return soon, planning to remain abroad long-term, and undecided. Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated for pairwise comparisons to assess practical significance alongside statistical significance.

For the unmet needs analysis, responses to open-ended questions 3 and 4 were coded deductively using Bradshaw's (1972) taxonomy across five domains: (a) psychosocial and emotional; (b) financial and material; (c) social engagement and community; (d) healthcare and physical; and (e) informational and technological. The frequency of mentions in current support (Q3) and desired additional support (Q4) were tabulated to produce a needs-gap matrix, where gap = desired percentage minus receiving percentage. Qualitative interview data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), generating themes grounded in participant language rather than imposed a priori categories.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore. All participants provided written informed consent before data collection. Anonymity was preserved through pseudonymisation; all names used in this paper are replaced with participant codes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or by telephone, in Malayalam, at participants' preference. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the named researchers.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Participant Profile

The participants ranged in age from 50 to 90, with 72.2% falling in the 50–60 bracket, a pattern consistent with Kerala's early-onset parental separation, where well-educated parents who sent children abroad for higher education often experience the loss of co-residence earlier than in other Indian states. Gender was relatively balanced (55.6% male, 44.4% female). Most participants were married (76.4%), though 11.1% were widowed. Living arrangements varied: 55.6% lived with their spouse or partner, 22.2% with non-migrated children, 6.9% alone, and 5.6% with other relatives.

Financially, 70.8% were self-earning through employment or pension, while a quarter relied substantially on family support. The primary reasons for children's migration were education (54.2%) and employment (47.2%), with marriage (19.4%) and better living standards (11.1%) also represented. The variable most central to this paper's findings was children's stated future plans: 52.8% of participants reported that their children's plans remained 'undecided,' 30.6% said their children planned to remain abroad long-term, and only 16.7% said their children planned to return soon. The prevalence of the 'undecided' category, over half the sample, underlines the scale and significance of the uncertainty condition.

***Table 1. Socio-demographic and Migration Profile of Participants (N = 72)***

| Variable | Category | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age Group | 50–60 years | 52 | 72.2 |
| | 61–70 years | 13 | 18.1 |
| | 71–80 years | 5 | 6.9 |
| | 81–90 years | 2 | 2.8 |
| Gender | Male | 40 | 55.6 |
| | Female | 32 | 44.4 |
| Marital Status | Married | 55 | 76.4 |
| | Widowed | 8 | 11.1 |
| | Single / Other | 4 | 5.6 |
| Living Arrangement | With partner / spouse | 40 | 55.6 |
| | With non-migrated children | 16 | 22.2 |
| | Alone | 5 | 6.9 |
| | With other relatives | 4 | 5.6 |
| Income Source | Employment or pension (self) | 51 | 70.8 |
| | Family / remittance support | 18 | 25.0 |
| | Government aid | 3 | 4.2 |
| Children's Future Plans | Undecided | 38 | 52.8 |
| | Long-term stay abroad | 22 | 30.6 |
| | Planning to return soon | 12 | 16.7 |
| Primary Reason for Migration | Education | 39 | 54.2 |
| | Employment | 34 | 47.2 |
| | Marriage | 14 | 19.4 |
| | Better living standards | 8 | 11.1 |

*Note. Multiple responses permitted for migration reason; percentages do not sum to 100%.*

### 4.2 Parental Uncertainty and Psychological Well-being

One-way ANOVA compared WHO-5 total scores and WHOQOL-BREF domain scores across the three children's future plans groups. The results showed a statistically significant difference in WHO-5 scores ($F(2, 69) = 4.31$, $p = 0.017$). Post-hoc Tukey tests confirmed that participants in the 'undecided' group ($M = 10.1$, $SD = 5.6$) scored significantly lower than both the 'planning to return' group ($M = 13.8$, $SD = 4.9$; Cohen's $d = 0.68$) and the 'long-term abroad' group ($M = 12.4$, $SD = 5.1$; Cohen's $d = 0.45$). The effect size between 'undecided' and 'planning to return' falls in the medium-to-large range, indicating a meaningful rather than merely statistically significant difference.

Critically, the 'undecided' group scored lower than the 'long-term abroad' group, suggesting that confirmed knowledge of permanent absence, however painful, allows a degree of psychological adjustment that sustained uncertainty does not. A parent who knows their child is not returning can, gradually, reorganise expectations and daily life. A parent who does not know cannot.

Significant differences were also found in the WHOQOL-BREF Psychological Domain ($F(2, 69) = 3.87$, $p = 0.025$) and Social Domain ($F(2, 69) = 3.14$, $p = 0.049$). No significant differences were found in the Physical Health domain ($p = 0.412$) or Environmental domain ($p = 0.658$), consistent with the interpretation that uncertainty operates primarily through emotional and relational pathways rather than through physical or material conditions.

***Table 2. Well-being Scores by Children's Future Plans***

| Scale / Domain | Return Soon M (SD) | Long-term Abroad M (SD) | Undecided M (SD) | F(2,69) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| WHO-5 Total | 13.8 (4.9) | 12.4 (5.1) | 10.1 (5.6) | 4.31 | 0.017* |
| Psychological Domain | 20.1 (3.2) | 18.9 (3.4) | 17.2 (3.8) | 3.87 | 0.025* |
| Social Domain | 12.3 (2.1) | 11.6 (2.3) | 10.4 (2.4) | 3.14 | 0.049* |
| Physical Domain | 23.1 (4.0) | 22.8 (4.2) | 22.1 (4.3) | 0.89 | 0.412 |
| Environmental Domain | 26.4 (3.9) | 25.8 (4.1) | 25.5 (4.0) | 0.42 | 0.658 |

*Note. *p < .05. ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey correction. WHO-5 maximum score = 25; domain scores per WHOQOL-BREF scoring protocol.*

Examining individual WHO-5 items within the 'undecided' group, the two items with the lowest average scores were 'I have felt calm and relaxed' (M = 1.7) and 'My daily life has been filled with things that interest me' (M = 1.9) , both of which tap into the capacity for emotional composure and present-focused engagement, precisely the capacities that chronic anticipatory worry disrupts.

### 4.3 Reason for Migration and Parental Well-being

Analysis of WHO-5 scores by primary migration reason revealed that parents of children who had migrated for marriage reported the lowest average well-being (M = 9.8, SD = 5.2), significantly lower than those whose children migrated for education (M = 12.6, SD = 5.3; t(51) = 2.14, p = .037). Parents of employment migrants showed intermediate scores (M = 11.4, SD = 5.4). This pattern is consistent with the cultural expectation that marriage migration, particularly for daughters into a husband's family, implies permanent relocation, a socially recognised and largely irreversible transition that carries a different emotional meaning from education-motivated separation, which retains an implicit expectation of eventual return.

***Table 3. WHO-5 Scores by Primary Reason for Children's Migration***

| Primary Reason for Migration | n | WHO-5 Mean | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education | 39 | 12.6 | 5.3 | 2–21 |
| Employment | 34 | 11.4 | 5.4 | 2–21 |
| Marriage | 14 | 9.8 | 5.2 | 2–20 |
| Better living standards | 8 | 11.1 | 5.0 | 3–20 |

*Note. Some participants cited multiple reasons; analysis uses primary/dominant reason as reported. WHO-5 maximum score = 25.*

### 4.4 Unmet Support Needs: Gap Analysis

Systematic coding of open-ended responses to questions about current support (Q3) and desired additional support (Q4) produced the needs-gap matrix shown in Table 4. Across all five domains, the percentage of participants identifying a desired improvement exceeded the percentage reporting that domain as currently met. The two largest gaps were in psychosocial and emotional support (39 percentage points) and financial and government assistance (36 percentage points).

On psychosocial support, only 28% of participants described receiving meaningful emotional support from community or social networks, yet 67% identified this as requiring improvement. Participants described receiving practical help, visits, transport to medical appointments, occasional meals, while experiencing a clear absence of emotional presence: someone to talk to, to sit with, and to acknowledge their grief. This distinction between practical and relational support is explored further in the qualitative findings.

On financial and government assistance, 18% reported currently receiving government financial support, while 54% identified this as a need. Participants across income levels described the inadequacy of existing pension provisions, fear of future medical costs, and anxiety about dependence on irregular remittances. Several specifically mentioned the absence of a dedicated financial scheme for parents of migrants, a category they felt was unrecognised in existing welfare architecture.

The social engagement domain showed a gap of 24 percentage points, with participants describing a desire for structured group activities, peer support gatherings, and day-care programmes that would reduce isolation, particularly for those with limited mobility. Healthcare access showed a 21-point gap, driven by difficulty managing chronic illness without family accompaniment to appointments. The smallest gap, though still significant, was in informational and technological support: only 8% received help with technology, yet 29% identified digital literacy assistance as needed.

***Table 4. Needs-Gap Matrix: Current Support Received vs. Additional Support Desired (N = 72)***

| Support Domain | Receiving (%) | Desired (%) | Gap (pp) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Psychosocial / Emotional | 28 | 67 | +39 |
| Financial / Government assistance | 18 | 54 | +36 |
| Social engagement / Community | 24 | 48 | +24 |
| Healthcare / Medical access | 31 | 52 | +21 |
| Informational / Digital literacy | 8 | 29 | +21 |

*Note. Gap = Desired (%) minus Receiving (%). pp = percentage points. Percentages based on coded open-ended responses; multiple domains per participant permitted.*

**4.5 Qualitative Findings**

Theme 1: Waiting Without a Horizon

Participants whose children's plans were undecided described their daily experience not as passive waiting but as an active, exhausting state of suspended readiness. They could not settle emotionally because they did not know what to settle into. A widow in her early sixties from Kottayam described the condition clearly:

> *"Every time the phone rings I think, is this the call where he says he is coming back? Or the call where he says he will stay there forever? I cannot settle in my mind. I am always half-ready for something." (Participant 2, female, 63)*

A retired government employee in Ernakulam had been delaying decisions about modifying his house and had put off joining a community health programme, because both decisions depended on whether his daughter would eventually return. This suspended decision-making reflects a genuine inability to construct a stable future-self narrative, which is central to psychological well-being in older age (Boss, 2006).

Theme 2: The Difference between Practical Help and Emotional Presence

Participants consistently distinguished between the support they received in a practical sense and the emotional presence they experienced as missing. A woman in her mid-sixties from Pathanamthitta reflected:

> *"Neighbours come. The church group comes. They bring food sometimes, they help me go to the hospital. They are kind people. But kindness is not the same as your child sitting next to you. It is not the same kind of company." (Participant 4, female, 66)*

Several participants noted that accepting practical support from outside the family carried a cost, a sense of obligation, a diminished sense of dignity, and an amplified awareness of those who should be there but were not. This suggests that received support may not translate directly into perceived support, and that the gap in psychosocial and emotional support cannot be addressed by increasing practical service provision alone.

Theme 3: Knowing What You Need

A striking feature of the qualitative data was the specificity with which participants articulated their needs. Rather than vague complaints or passive resignation, participants offered concrete, actionable suggestions: a dedicated government pension scheme for families who had 'sent children abroad but received nothing back in their old age'; counselling services attached to existing health centres; community peer groups for parents of migrants; mobile health camps reducing the need for family accompaniment; and smartphone training in church halls offered by younger volunteers.

> *"We're not helpless, we know exactly what's missing. If the government or community groups just asked us, we could tell them how to help. We don't want pity; we want services that actually understand our daily lives, like a pension scheme for families who sent kids abroad and have no support, or counselling services right at our local health centres."*

This theme positions elderly parents not as passive welfare recipients but as informed agents capable of contributing to service design (Buffel, 2018), a reframing with direct implications for how intervention programmes are designed.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Uncertainty as an Independent Stressor

The central quantitative finding, that parents with 'undecided' children report lower well-being than even those whose children have confirmed permanent absence, is theoretically significant and practically important. It directly challenges the implicit assumption in migration research that duration of separation is the primary determinant of parental distress. The data suggest that the quality of the separation, specifically its temporal ambiguity, matters as much as, or more than, its length.

Ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2006) provides the most direct explanation. The parent cannot mourn the departure because the child may return; they cannot accept permanent absence because no such decision has been made. They are left in a state of suspended adjustment, what Boss calls 'frozen grief.' Al-Hamad et al. (2025) describe the same phenomenon among ageing migrants in terms of disruptions to belonging, identity, and continuity, dimensions that directly correspond to the low WHO-5 scores on calmness and daily engagement reported by the 'undecided' group in this study.

The intolerance of uncertainty literature reinforces this interpretation. Morriss et al. (2024), in a large international multi-site study, confirmed that intolerance of uncertainty is independently associated with both anxiety and depression over and above the actual occurrence of negative events. Among elderly people with reduced cognitive flexibility and fewer social outlets for emotional processing, this pattern is likely to be self-sustaining and difficult to interrupt without targeted support.

Practically, this means that interventions aimed only at maintaining contact frequency, regular video calls, for example, may not adequately address the distress of uncertainty. What the 'undecided' group needs above all is not more contact but a different quality of communication: conversations that move toward clarity, even partial clarity, about future plans. Social work

practitioners can play a role through family communication facilitation, helping migrant children and their parents navigate the difficult conversations about long-term plans that families often avoid.

### 5.2 Why Migration Reason Matters

The finding that parents of children who are migrated as part of marriage report lower well-being than those of children who are migrated for education adds an important cultural layer to the picture. In Kerala's predominantly patri-local context, a daughter's marriage involves an understood transition to her husband's household. When that marriage also involves international relocation, parents may experience the departure not merely as physical distance but as a culturally sanctioned and permanent loss of caregiving relationship, a loss that is not publicly mourned but that affects daily experience profoundly.

Education related migration, by contrast, carries an implicit expectation of return or of continued filial responsibility. The parent can maintain the narrative of a temporary separation with a shared future. This narrative difference, not the distance or duration itself, may account for the well-being gap between the two groups, and suggests that culturally sensitive social work practice should attend not only to how long a child has been away and how far, but to what kind of departure it was and what meaning it carries within the family's cultural context.

### 5.3 The Structure of Unmet Need

The needs-gap matrix reveals a clear pattern: the domains with the largest gaps are not the practical and physical ones but the emotional and financial ones. Community networks, religious organisations, and extended family in Kerala appear to be providing reasonable levels of practical support. But emotional presence, financial security, and structured social engagement remain significantly underserved.

This pattern is consistent with Mohan et al. (2025), who found that emotional deprivation, not functional disability, was the primary driver of vulnerability among elderly parents in Kerala's migrant households. It also resonates with Sen's (1999) capability approach, which argues that genuine well-being requires not merely the meeting of functional needs but the capacity for emotional agency, social participation, and self-expression. Elderly parents who receive practical help but lack emotional companionship and financial security are not living with full capability well-being in this sense.

The financial gap deserves particular policy attention. Kerala's pension system currently offers Rs. 1,600 monthly under the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme for those meeting income criteria, widely seen as inadequate given current healthcare costs (Kerala Social Justice Department, 2025). Participants who do not fall below the income threshold receive nothing from

this scheme yet may be fully dependent on unpredictable remittances from children abroad. This is a structural vulnerability that existing welfare categories do not address.

### 5.4 Policy Context: The Kerala State Elderly Commission

The passage of the Kerala State Elderly Commission Act, 2025 represents a significant policy development directly relevant to this study's findings. Kerala has become the first Indian state to establish a statutory quasi-judicial body specifically for the welfare and protection of senior citizens, with a mandate that includes addressing neglect, exploitation, and loneliness (The Print, 2025; The South First, 2025). This study's needs-gap matrix offers a domain-level evidence base, derived from the self-reported experiences of elderly parents in migrant-sending households that can directly guide the commission's priorities: psychosocial and emotional support, dedicated financial provisions for parents of migrants, and structured social engagement programmes.

### 5.5 Elderly as Agents, Not Recipients

Perhaps the most practically useful finding of the qualitative analysis is the specificity with which participants described their own needs. These were not vague expressions of unhappiness but detailed, actionable, contextually informed proposals grounded in real knowledge of local institutions, cultural preferences, and practical constraints. This challenges the paternalistic assumptions that often underlie elderly welfare design, and supports the growing call in gerontological social work for participatory approaches that position older adults as co-designers of the services they use (Buffel, 2018). The participants in this study demonstrated clearly that they can identify their own needs, articulate the gap between what they receive and what they require, and propose realistic solutions. Their knowledge should be central to any new intervention design.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should inform interpretation. First, the sample is drawn from three central Kerala districts with specific characteristics , relatively high literacy, strong church-based welfare infrastructure , that may not generalise to northern Kerala, tribal areas, or other Indian states with high youth out-migration. Future research should extend to these settings.

Second, the study lacks a control group of elderly parents whose children have not migrated. Without this comparison, it is not possible to definitively attribute the lower well-being scores in the 'undecided' group to migration-related uncertainty rather than to pre-existing individual characteristics or other sources of stress. Future research should incorporate matched control groups and longitudinal designs to isolate migration-specific effects and establish causal direction (Mandal et al., 2025; Conduah & Smith, 2025).

Third, the cross-sectional design means causal direction cannot be established. It is possible that parents with lower baseline well-being communicate in ways that make it harder for children to commit to return plans, producing the 'undecided' outcome rather than resulting from it. Longitudinal designs tracking well-being alongside the crystallisation of children's plans would substantially strengthen causal inference.

Fourth, the qualitative sample of five participants is appropriate for an explanatory sequential design but limits the range of experiences captured. Future research with a larger, more purposively diverse qualitative sample, including participants who are widowed, living alone, or whose children migrated for marriage, would provide a richer account. Fifth, this study does not include the perspectives of the migrant children themselves. Understanding how children experience and communicate uncertainty about return plans would enable a more complete picture of the transnational family dynamics that produce parental distress.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has produced two findings with clear implications for research, practice, and policy. First, uncertainty about whether migrating children will return is an independent psychological stressor among elderly parents in Kerala, one that produces more distress than confirmed long-term absence, operating through mechanisms consistent with ambiguous loss and intolerance of uncertainty. Second, the support that elderly parents in migrant-sending households most urgently need , emotional and psychosocial presence, financial security, and structured social engagement, is precisely what current community and government provision least adequately supplies.

These findings arrive at a moment of genuine policy opportunity. The Kerala State Elderly Commission (2025), alongside the existing *Vayomithram* and *Samayaprabha* programmes, collectively represent a policy infrastructure that, if evidence-guided, could meaningfully address the gaps this study documents. The following recommendations are grounded in that evidence.

For the Kerala State Elderly Commission and policymakers: Develop a dedicated financial support scheme for parents of migrants who do not qualify for existing income-tested pensions but are dependent on irregular remittances. Commission a state-level survey of unmet needs among elderly parents in migrant-sending households to generate the district-level data needed for proportionate resource allocation.

For social work practitioners: Incorporate uncertainty-sensitive assessment into work with elderly clients from migrant-sending families. When children's future plans are undecided, this should trigger specific psychosocial support, including therapeutic approaches appropriate to ambiguous

loss, such as narrative therapy and uncertainty-tolerance interventions. Family communication facilitation, supporting parents and migrant children in honest conversations about long-term plans, should be recognised as a core social work intervention in this context.

For community organisations and churches: Expand the emotional and relational dimensions of existing support programmes. Practical assistance is valued but is not experienced as emotionally equivalent to family presence. Structured peer support groups for parents of migrants, facilitated bereavement-sensitive group sessions, and intergenerational community engagement programmes can begin to address the relational gap.

For digital inclusion programmes: Deliver community-based digital literacy training in trusted local settings , churches, health centres, local government offices , focused not only on technical skill but on enabling elderly parents to have meaningful conversations with migrant children, including conversations about future plans.

Kerala's elderly population will reach an estimated 8.4 million by 2036 (Kerala Social Justice Department, 2025), and the structural conditions driving youth migration are not going to reverse. The challenge is to build an eldercare system adequate to the realities that migration creates, one that addresses not only physical and financial needs but the emotional and relational dimensions of ageing in a family dispersed across borders. This study provides a grounded, evidence-based map of where the gaps are largest and what filling them would require.

**References**

Al-Hamad, A., Yasin, Y. M., Yasin, L., Zhang, A., & Ahmed, S. (2025). Ambiguous loss among aging migrants: A concept analysis- and nursing care-oriented model. *Healthcare*, *13*(20), Article 2606. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13202606

Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674003811

Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. W. W. Norton. https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393704495

Bradshaw, J. (1972). *The taxonomy of social need*. In G. McLachlan (Ed.), *Problems and progress in medical care: Essays on current research* (7th series, pp. 71–82). Oxford University Press. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/118357/1/bradshaw_taxonomy.pdf

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Buffel, T. (2018). Social research and co-production with older people: Developing age-friendly communities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *21*(6), 681–693. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1479541

Conduah, A. K., & Smith, E. (2025). Intersecting impacts of ageing, migration, and socioeconomic vulnerability: Lessons for post-pandemic policy. *Global Public Health*, *20*(1), 1120–1138. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2025.12593769

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dugas, M. J., Buhr, K., & Ladouceur, R. (2004). The role of intolerance of uncertainty in the etiology and maintenance of worry. In R. G. Heimberg, C. L. Turk, & D. S. Mennin (Eds.), *Generalized anxiety disorder: Advances in research and practice* (pp. 143–163). Guilford Press.

Ekoh, A., Walsh, F., Iwuagwu, S., & George, S. (2022). Effect of forced migration on social networks and support for older refugees in Western countries: A scoping review. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *105*, Article 104839. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2022.104839

Fathima, H. (2025). Youth migration from Kerala to the Global North: Exploring the evolving migration patterns. *Global Media Journal*, *23*(75). https://doi.org/10.36648/1550-7521.23.75.494

Ghimire, S., Singh, D. R., Nath, D., Jeffers, E. M., & Kaphle, M. (2018). Adult children's migration and well-being of left-behind Nepalese elderly parents. *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, *8*(3–4), 154–161. https://doi.org/10.2991/jegh.k.181112.001

Government of Kerala, General Administration Department. (2026, May 19). *G.O. (Ms) No. 63/2026/GAD: Constituting of Senior Citizens Welfare Department* [Government order].

Haripriya, A., & Sharmili, C. (2024). Life satisfaction and psychological well-being among empty nesters and non-empty nesters in Kerala. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *12*(2), 2488–2499. https://doi.org/10.25215/1202.215

Ismail, Z., Ahmad, W. I. W., Hamjah, S. H., & Astina, I. K. (2021). Understanding the effect of population aging in Malaysia: A thematic analysis. *Iranian Journal of Public Health*, *50*(12), 2451–2460. https://doi.org/10.18502/ijph.v50i12.7898

Kalangadan, A., & Menon, R. (2024). Household well-being and migration in Kerala: A comparative analysis using state migration surveys. *SAGE Open*, *14*(3), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241273869

Kerala Social Justice Department. (2025). *Kerala State Elderly Commission Act, 2025: Overview and mandate*. Government of Kerala.

Li, J., & Chen, W. (2023). Children's internal migration and subjective wellbeing of older parents left behind: Spiritual or financial support? *Frontiers in Public Health*, *11*, Article 1111288. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1111288

Limaye, M. P., Jose, J. M., & Wagani, R. (2023). Effect of migration of children among elderly people. *International Journal of Humanities, Law and Social Sciences*, *X*(VII), 99. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373111038

Mandal, B., Samanta, R., & colleagues. (2025). Adult son migration and labour force participation of older adults in India: Evidence from LASI. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, *28*(1), 234–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40847-025-00493-2

Mathews, A. (2024, March 7). Kerala's brain drain: How student migration affects society. *Frontline*. https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/keralas-brain-drain-the-uncomfortable-truths-of-upcoming-kms-survey

McCormack, B., & McCance, T. (2010). *Person-centred nursing: Theory and practice*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444390506

Mohan, A., Jothikaran, T. A. J., Patil, D. S., & Ashok, L. (2025). 'Care beyond co-residence': A qualitative exploration of emotional and instrumental care gaps among older adults in migrant households of Kerala. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *22*(11), Article 1745. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22111745

Morriss, J., Bell, V., & colleagues. (2024). Associations between intolerance of uncertainty, paranoia, anxiety, and depression: Evidence from an international multisite sample. *Mental Health Science*, *2*, Article e81. https://doi.org/10.1002/mhs2.81

Näsling, M., Hedman-Lagerlöf, E., Ljótsson, B., & Sahlin, H. (2024). Effect of psychotherapy on intolerance of uncertainty: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *31*, Article e3026. https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.3026

Rai, D. R., & Dangal, M. R. (2021). The effect of migration on family in Nepal: A review on the family structure, livelihood, education, aging parents, reproductive health and marital relationship. *Open Journal for Anthropological Studies, 5*(2), 49–60. https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojas.0502.02049r

Rajan, S. I., Shajan, A., & Sunitha, S. (2020). Ageing and elderly care in Kerala. *China Report*, *56*(3), 354–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520939214

Rajan, S. I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2023). *Kerala Migration Survey 2023: Key findings and policy insights*. Centre for Development Studies.

Reji, D., & Thomas, S. (2025). Effect of youth migration on elderly people in Kerala: A mixed-methods study on quality of life and well-being. *Using sustainable neighbourhood Resources for successful aging amidst global crises.* IGI Global Scientific Publishing (pp. 125–146). https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3373-1449-5.ch005

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

The Indian Express. (2026, May 24). Why Kerala has announced a new department for welfare of senior citizens. *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/

The Print. (2025, March 21). How Kerala plans to take care of its ageing population with a dedicated commission. *The Print*. https://theprint.in/india/governance/how-kerala-plans-to-take-care-of-its-ageing-population

The South First. (2025, February 15). Kerala moves to establish India's first elderly commission to tackle rapidly ageing population. *The South First*. https://thesouthfirst.com/kerala/kerala-moves-to-establish-indias-first-elderly-commission

Uddin, M. E. (2024). Human development pathways for understanding sustainable use of neighborhood resources and successful aging during crises. R. Baikady (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of global social problems* (pp. 1–21). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_440-1 .

UNFPA India. (2023). *India ageing report 2023*. United Nations Population Fund.

United Nations Population Fund. (2023). *India ageing report 2023: Caring for our elders-Institutional responses*. United Nations Population Fund. https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/20230926_india_ageing_report_2023_web_version_.pdf

Wenger, G. C. (1984). *The supportive network: Coping with old age*. George Allen & Unwin.

WHOQOL Group. (1998). The World Health Organization Quality of Life Assessment (WHOQOL): Development and general psychometric properties. *Social Science & Medicine*, *46*(12), 1569–1585. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00009-4

Zhang, C., Shi, Y., & Li, X. (2022). The impact of adult children's rural–urban migration on left-behind older parents: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *10*, Article 951124. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.951124