

# Does spiritual coping help families of international migrants thrive? A qualitative study of social work practices in Kerala

Anurupa Bhattacharjee and Princy Thomas, Department of Sociology and Social Work, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Spiritual coping strategies have been increasingly recognised for supporting emotional wellbeing among families of migrants experiencing prolonged separation. This study investigates the role of spiritual coping mechanisms implemented by professional social workers to help families of international migrants in Kerala, focusing on their effectiveness and associated challenges.

**METHODS:** The study involved two groups of participants: 12 social workers with at least 2 years of experience supporting families of international migrants and 10 individual members of families of international migrants who had received social work interventions incorporating spiritual coping strategies over a minimum period of 6 months. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with social workers and families, focusing on their lived experiences and the integration of spiritual coping practices. Thematic analysis was used to identify core themes and insights.

**FINDINGS:** Three key themes emerged: (1) spiritual coping and resilience, where spiritual practices regulate emotions and provide reassurance; (2) challenges in integrating spirituality, involving ethical dilemmas and balancing professional boundaries; and (3) outcomes of spiritual coping, where shared faith strengthened bonds and offered long-term stress relief.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Spirituality is a practical support tool for such families. However, overreliance and ethical concerns highlight the need for a balanced integration into social work practice.

**Keywords:** Spiritual coping, social work interventions, emotional wellbeing, cultural continuity

The global migration crisis presents immense challenges for both migrants and the professionals who support them (Asadzadeh et al., 2022). As families endure prolonged separation, psychological strain becomes significant (Liddell et al., 2022). Families of international migrants face distress, including anxiety, depression, and isolation, which affects their wellbeing (Ermansons et al., 2023; Hasan et al., 2021). Social

workers play a crucial role in addressing these challenges, yet their strategies remain underexplored (Taha et al., 2024).

This study examines the intersection of spiritual coping and social work in Kerala. Families often use prayer and meditation to manage distress, yet their integration into social work is insufficiently studied (Banerjee et al., 2021). Social workers recognise

AOTEAROA  
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL  
WORK 37(2), 121–135.

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Anurupa Bhattacharjee  
anurupa.bhattacharjee@  
res.christuniversity.in

spirituality as vital in fostering resilience, using it as a tool to support migrant families (Ciaramella et al., 2021; Olcese et al., 2023). However, tensions arise between spiritual strategies and conventional secular approaches in social work (Aggarwal et al., 2023). To address this gap, this study advocates including spiritual coping as a legitimate social work component, challenging the stigma around alternative mental health approaches (Ahad et al., 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

The role of spirituality in Kerala parallels Māori cultural practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, where both emphasise holistic wellbeing. Kerala's spiritual institutions and Māori communal spaces offer spiritual and social support, fostering belonging (Williams et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2021). Rituals like Kerala's prayer sessions and Māori karakia reinforce cultural identity and provide emotional stability (Greaves et al., 2023; Taute et al., 2023). Both frameworks empower individuals by drawing strength from traditions, highlighting spirituality's relevance in global social work (Drisko & Grady, 2019; Lockhart et al., 2019).

### **Spirituality, power dynamics, and ethical considerations in social work**

Spirituality in Kerala plays a vital role in the emotional wellbeing of migrant families, offering coping mechanisms during separation. While religion provides communal support, spirituality extends beyond religious boundaries, serving as a personal resource for meaning, purpose, and resilience (Andrade et al., 2023; Coope et al., 2020). Meditation, prayer, and mindfulness help regulate stress and anxiety (Kienzler et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2021). Although personal, and not always tied to spiritual institutions, these practices enable families to navigate emotional struggles (Alkholy et al., 2022). However, integrating spirituality into social work requires careful navigation of power dynamics to prevent the imposition of belief

systems on vulnerable individuals. Social workers must remain sensitive to diverse spiritual beliefs, ensuring that spirituality is a tool for resilience, not indoctrination (Francoeur et al., 2016).

In Kerala's multicultural setting, collaboration with spiritual institutions must balance cultural sensitivity with ethical practice. While offering emotional and social support, these institutions can create power imbalances if not approached carefully (Andersen et al., 2021; Jones, 1986). This risk is particularly significant in rural areas, where families may have limited resources to question spiritual guidance (Bjørlykhaug et al., 2021). Social workers must ensure that spiritual support remains voluntary, respecting family beliefs while maintaining professional boundaries (Tavares et al., 2022; Willemse et al., 2020). Collaboration with spiritual leaders should prioritise family autonomy, offering support without coercion and ensuring that spirituality remains a beneficial and ethical resource in social work (Appiah et al., 2024; Tabor et al., 2019; Willemse et al., 2020).

### **Integrating spiritual coping in social work: a holistic approach**

In Kerala's rural villages, challenges such as limited mental health resources and prolonged separation-related stress are common. Families rely on spiritual traditions for comfort, managing stressors like economic instability and emotional isolation (Firdaus, 2017; Omelchenko et al., 2018). Social workers recognise that effective intervention requires more than secular support—it must incorporate community spiritual values. By integrating spiritual coping, social workers create a holistic support system aligned with cultural norms while addressing mental health needs (Kumar & Pramod, 2016; Rajan, 2023).

This approach involves assessing families' emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs and recognising their multifaceted

experiences. Social workers design interventions to meet each family's religious and spiritual background, ensuring that coping mechanisms resonate with cultural values. Collaboration with religious leaders helps integrate rituals such as prayer, meditation, and spiritual counselling alongside traditional therapeutic techniques (Mandelkowitz et al., 2021; Yantzi et al., 2023). This culturally sensitive model enhances intervention effectiveness by strengthening families' spiritual foundations (De Haene & Rousseau, 2020; Matlin et al., 2018).

A key feature of this approach is empowerment—social workers encourage families to draw strength from spirituality rather than imposing a singular practice. This strategy fosters resilience, reinforcing cultural identity and agency. Community engagement plays a crucial role, with spiritual institutions facilitating emotional support through communal activities that reduce isolation. Social workers promote emotional relief and social cohesion by providing access to these resources. This holistic model strengthens cultural and spiritual identities, contributing to more resilient communities (UNESCO, 2021; Gümüşay et al., 2019).

Through strategic integration, spiritual coping mechanisms offer an effective solution to the emotional challenges faced by migrant families, promoting a culturally responsive social work practice (Iyer et al., 2023; Matlin et al., 2018).

## Methods

### *Terminologies used for participants*

In this study, the phrase “international migrants from Kerala” refers to individuals who have migrated from Kerala to other countries, mainly for blue-collar jobs in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic work, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi

Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). “Families of international migrants in Kerala” refers to the left-behind family members—spouses, children, parents, and kin—residing in Kerala while their relatives work abroad. Notably, this term does not refer to migrants living in Kerala.

## Participants

Participants were recruited through personal networks and professional social work forums, including a migrant worker support group with over 15,000 members. Purposive sampling was used to select professional social workers in Kerala who worked with families of international migrants experiencing prolonged separation and who integrated spiritual coping mechanisms into their interventions. This included social workers and families, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effectiveness.

Spiritual coping includes spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture study, and non-religious (but spiritually significant) activities like community support, meditation, and connection to nature. Participants self-reported these mechanisms, reflecting diverse personal and cultural interpretations of spirituality.

The study involved two groups:

1. Social workers with at least 2 years of experience working with migrant families facing emotional distress.
2. Families of international migrants who had received social work support for at least 6 months and engaged in spiritual coping strategies.

The families represented diverse demographic backgrounds, including rural Kerala, and varied in education, economic status, and migration history. Participants included parents, spouses, siblings, and extended family members in joint family systems. Children were excluded.

Twelve social workers (ages 30–55,  $M = 42$ ) with 2–25 years of experience participated. The 10 families (35 individuals) came from rural areas, with migration-induced separation lasting from months to years. Economic and social factors influenced their experiences. Families practised various spiritual coping strategies, including daily prayer, yoga, meditation, and community rituals. Some followed specific religious traditions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam), while others engaged in secular spiritual coping. This sample aligns with qualitative research standards, providing a diverse dataset for an in-depth analysis of spiritual coping in social work.

### Procedures

Following ethical standards, participants were fully informed about the study, their rights, and voluntary participation. Ethical approval was obtained from the university as part of the PhD process, and informed consent was secured before data collection.

### Data collection

Semi-structured, confidential, one-on-one interviews were conducted, allowing open discussions. The interview guide, reviewed by a mental health social worker, focused on spiritual coping mechanisms. Open-ended questions avoided pre-set themes, encouraging participants to share freely. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and analysed using thematic analysis.

### Reflexivity

The researcher's social work background informed the study while maintaining neutrality. Personal spiritual practices were not disclosed to minimise bias. Reflexivity was ensured throughout, with attention to explicit and implicit biases to maintain objectivity.

### Analysis approach

The thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying key

themes. This inductive, data-driven approach ensured findings reflected participants' lived experiences within Kerala's socio-cultural context. The study explored how spiritual coping shaped emotional resilience among families of international migrants. A literature review identified a research gap: While spirituality is acknowledged as a coping tool, its systematic application in social work interventions for migrant families remains underexplored.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations. Self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias. Findings are specific to Kerala and may not be generalised to other contexts. Children's perspectives were excluded, focusing solely on adult family members and social workers. While consistent with qualitative research standards, the sample size may not capture the full diversity of experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the role of spiritual coping in supporting the emotional wellbeing of families of international migrants in Kerala.

### Results

The role of spiritual coping mechanisms in supporting the emotional wellbeing of families of international migrants in Kerala emerges as a profound and multi-faceted theme. Spirituality, in various forms, has been reported as a critical resource that helps families navigate the psychological challenges associated with prolonged separation.

### Key themes and insights

#### *Theme 1: The role of spiritual coping in emotional stability*

Spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and mindfulness, are crucial for

helping families of international migrants manage the emotional stress caused by separation. These practices offer both immediate relief and long-term emotional stability.

**Subtheme 1.1: Spiritual practices for emotional regulation and clarity in social work.**

Spiritual practices such as meditation and reflection help families regain emotional balance. Social worker 4 noted, "Families engage in quiet meditation to calm down and regain focus." Similarly, Family 3 (Parent) shared, "Reflecting on my emotions daily helped me understand myself better." These practices assist families in processing emotions and maintaining resilience in stressful situations. Family 5 (Parent) added, "Meditation was my way of connecting with a deeper sense of peace."

**Subtheme 1.2: Spirituality as a coping mechanism for anxiety and depression.**

Spiritual practices provide relief from anxiety and depression. Family 6 (Parent) said, "Deep breathing helped me let go of worry and find clarity." Family 7 (Parent) emphasised reflecting on purpose: "It made me feel more grounded and less fearful." These practices help families navigate stress and maintain hope despite challenges. Family 3 (Parent) added, "Focusing on the good things I still had helped me reset my mind."

***Inferences and analysis of theme 1.***

Spiritual coping through practices like prayer and meditation plays a significant role in managing emotional stress, reducing anxiety, and offering hope. Social workers recognise the value of these practices in fostering emotional resilience, helping families process grief, and maintaining emotional wellbeing during difficult times.

***Theme 2: The cultural and religious underpinnings of spiritual coping***

The cultural and religious contexts in which families of international migrants live shape their spiritual coping mechanisms. Family rituals, prayers, and the guidance of religious leaders play key roles in navigating emotional and social challenges related to migration. These spiritual practices offer emotional stability and foster a sense of connection despite physical separation.

**Subtheme 2.1: Cultural significance of spirituality in family life.**

Spirituality is deeply embedded in family life, with practices like collective prayers and rituals promoting emotional cohesion. Social worker 5 observed, "The whole family participates in spiritual practices, helping them stay connected emotionally despite being apart." Family 9 shared, "My mother taught me how to pray, and I continue that tradition with my children." These practices, passed down through generations, provide emotional stability, especially during tough times. Family 4 (Parent) emphasised, "We include my husband in our prayers even though he's far away, bringing us peace." Rituals like lighting a lamp before important events offer a sense of purpose and continuity. Social workers recognise these practices as vital in maintaining familial bonds and emotional resilience.

**Subtheme 2.2: Role of spiritual leaders in facilitating coping.**

Spiritual leaders provide essential emotional support to families of international migrants. Social worker 7 noted, "Families often visit the temple for blessings and prayers, which give them peace and reassurance." Family 1 (Parent) shared, "The local temple offers a support group for families of the blue-collar international migrant, where we feel connected." Spiritual leaders provide comfort through prayer and personal counsel, helping families manage anxieties. Family 3 (Parent)



emphasised, “The priest prays for us and checks in on our well-being, which is very comforting.” Social workers encourage families to engage with spiritual leaders to strengthen their emotional support systems.

#### *Inferences and analysis of theme 2.*

Cultural and spiritual practices deeply influence spiritual coping, which helps families stay emotionally connected despite separation. Shared rituals (such as family prayers), provide comfort and unity, while spiritual leaders offer reassurance and support. These practices give families a sense of stability and continuity, fostering emotional resilience. Social workers recognise the importance of these practices and incorporate them into their support strategies.

### ***Theme 3: The integration of spiritual practices into social work***

This theme examines how spiritual practices are integrated into social work, enhancing the emotional wellbeing of families of international migrants. Spiritual coping is a complementary tool, offering emotional stability and resilience. However, challenges arise in balancing spiritual practices with social work’s professional boundaries and secular nature.

**Subtheme 3.1: Social workers’ views on spiritual coping as a complementary tool.** Social workers recognise the value of integrating spiritual practices with traditional evidence-based methods to enhance emotional support for families of blue-collar international migrants. Spirituality is seen as a tool that provides comfort, peace, and stability during difficult times. Social worker 2 stated, “Integrating spiritual practices enhances emotional wellbeing.” Social worker 3 added, “Spirituality complements evidence-based methods by offering peace and grounding.” Spirituality also helps families reconnect with their cultural roots, providing hope

and resilience. Social worker 5 noted, “Spiritual coping fills in the gaps when traditional methods fall short,” underscoring the role of spirituality in addressing emotional needs that conventional approaches may not meet.

**Subtheme 3.2: Challenges in integrating spiritual practices.** Integrating spirituality into social work presents challenges, particularly in maintaining professional boundaries and navigating the secular nature of the profession. Social workers must avoid imposing beliefs while offering spiritual support. Social worker 4 emphasised, “We encourage families to connect with their faith, but we don’t impose it.” However, as Social worker 9 noted, “It’s a fine line between offering spiritual support and crossing into personal space.” Maintaining this balance is essential to avoid overstepping boundaries, as highlighted by Social worker 6: “Spiritual practices are personal, and we must not become over-involved.” Social workers view themselves as facilitators, guiding clients without taking on the role of spiritual leaders.

#### *Inferences and analysis of theme 3.*

Spiritual coping is a valuable complement to traditional social work methods, offering emotional support for families of blue-collar international migrants. However, social workers face challenges in maintaining professional boundaries while integrating spiritual practices. Spiritual support should be provided, and clients’ autonomy and beliefs should be respected. Despite these challenges, social workers acknowledge the importance of spirituality in fostering resilience and maintaining hope during difficult times.

### ***Theme 4: Resilience through spiritual coping***

This theme examines how spiritual coping mechanisms contribute to the emotional

resilience of families of blue-collar international migrants. Spiritual practices provide stability, fostering strength and hope in the face of migration-related stress. Faith and shared rituals become essential for emotional grounding during separation and uncertainty.

**Subtheme 4.1: Strengthening emotional resilience in families.**

Spiritual beliefs serve as long-term sources of resilience, enabling families to endure the ongoing stress of migration. The Family 4 Respondent shared, "My faith has been my anchor. Even though my husband is far away, we will overcome these challenges together." Spiritual coping also acts as a protective barrier against prolonged stress. Social worker 9 explained, "Spiritual coping provides a sense of continuity and protection, especially when families are separated for long periods." Family 2 (Parent) added, "My faith keeps me strong. It helps me overcome the tough days when I miss my family." Spirituality offers families stability in uncertain times, reinforcing their resilience and sense of hope.

**Subtheme 4.2: Family bonding**

**through shared faith.** Shared spiritual practices are key in strengthening family connections, even across physical distances. Family 5 (Parent) noted, "We pray together every evening. This practice has made us feel united despite the physical separation." This ritual provides a sense of emotional closeness. Family 3 (Parent) shared, "Even though we're apart, praying together brings us closer." For some families, spirituality fosters a sense of belonging and helps them stay connected to their cultural roots. "When we pray together, it reminds us of our family member who lives abroad and keeps our family united," explained Family 1 (Parent).

***Inferences and analysis of theme 4.***

Spiritual coping is integral to the

emotional resilience of blue-collar international migrant families. Families find the strength to cope with their loved ones' migration challenges through shared faith and individual beliefs. Spirituality provides emotional grounding and strengthens family bonds, creating a sense of unity and continuity in difficult times.

***Theme 5: Spiritual coping and psychological well-being***

This theme explores the role of spiritual coping in maintaining psychological wellbeing, especially in the context of loss and uncertainty. Spiritual practices help families of international migrants heal emotionally, providing comfort and stability during times of grief and stress.

**Subtheme 5.1: Coping with loss and**

**separation.** Spirituality plays a crucial role in helping families deal with the emotional impact of losing loved ones due to migration. Social worker 3 explained, "For many, the absence of a family member was seen as a loss. Spiritual practices like rituals and prayers provided comfort and healing." Rituals offer a space for mourning, and prayers help families process grief. Family 6 (Parent) shared, "Whenever I felt uncertain about my husband's safety, I prayed for his wellbeing. It gave me peace of mind." Spirituality also helps families navigate the emotional strain of prolonged separation. "I find solace in my faith," said Family 2 (Parent). "When I feel lonely, praying gives me a sense of connection with my loved ones, even if they're far away."

Spiritual practices ease the pain of loss and offer protection during uncertain times. Family 3 (Parent) noted, "When I worry about my child's safety, I pray. It's like a shield that calms my fears." This highlights how spirituality helps mitigate anxiety and brings emotional stability during moments of vulnerability.

*Inferences and analysis of theme 5.*

Spiritual coping serves as a powerful tool for emotional healing and psychological wellbeing, especially for families of international migrants facing loss and uncertainty. Spiritual practices offer comfort, providing a sense of connection, healing, and emotional stability during challenging times of separation and grief.

**Theme 6: The limitations and drawbacks of spiritual coping**

This theme examines the potential limitations and disadvantages of spiritual coping, focusing on the risks of over-reliance on spirituality and the need for a balanced approach that includes practical solutions. While spirituality provides valuable emotional support, its overuse can sometimes hinder practical problem-solving and lead to emotional exhaustion.

**Subtheme 6.1: Over-reliance on spiritual practices.** Some social workers raised concerns about families depending too heavily on spiritual practices while neglecting practical solutions. Social worker 10 remarked, “While spirituality is helpful, it cannot replace practical steps like legal support, education, or healthcare. Families must also address these practical aspects.” This highlights the importance of balancing spiritual practices with actionable, real-world solutions to address migration-related challenges.

In certain instances, families became emotionally exhausted from relying solely on faith to resolve their difficulties. Family 2 (Parent) shared, “I always prayed, but sometimes I felt like it wasn’t enough. I realised I needed to take more action, not just pray.” This reflects the potential for frustration and burnout when spirituality is seen as the sole solution to complex issues. Similarly, Family 4 (Parent) expressed, “There were moments when I felt like I was losing

hope as if prayer alone wasn’t helping. I had to focus on finding practical ways to move forward.”

Social workers also noted the risk of families avoiding necessary action in favour of spiritual reliance. Social worker 8 reported, “Sometimes, families get caught up hoping for divine intervention instead of actively seeking help. It’s important to remind them that spirituality should complement practical efforts, not replace them.” This underlines the importance of integrating spiritual and practical coping mechanisms to address the full scope of challenges faced by families of international migrants.

*Inferences and analysis of theme 6.* While spiritual coping can offer vital emotional support, an overreliance on it may hinder families from seeking practical solutions and lead to emotional exhaustion. Social workers emphasise the need for a balanced approach, where spirituality complements, rather than replaces, practical actions to address migration-related challenges.

**Theme 7: Social workers’ perceptions of spiritual coping**

This theme explores how social workers perceive the role of spiritual coping in supporting the families of international migrants, recognising its value while maintaining a professional approach. Social workers acknowledge the positive impact of spiritual practices and highlight their ethical responsibility to ensure neutrality and respect for clients’ beliefs.

**Subtheme 7.1: Acknowledging the value of spiritual practices.** Social workers widely acknowledge the positive role of spiritual coping in enhancing the emotional wellbeing of families of international migrants. Social worker 12 stated, “I’ve seen families thrive with the help of their faith. It provides them with



a framework for coping with challenges that we, as social workers, can't always address." Spiritual practices are seen as an essential resource for families facing the emotional toll of migration, helping them build resilience in difficult circumstances.

However, social workers also emphasised the importance of maintaining a professional stance while acknowledging the value of spirituality. Social worker 11 remarked, "It's essential to encourage spirituality but also to remain neutral and professional in our approach to ensure families don't feel pressured." This reflects the need for a delicate balance between offering spiritual support and respecting the client's autonomy, ensuring that spirituality is introduced as an option, not an imposition.

Social worker 14 explained, "Spiritual coping is a powerful tool, but we must ensure we don't cross professional boundaries. It's about supporting families in ways that respect their personal beliefs." This reinforces the idea that social workers should facilitate spiritual coping while maintaining professional ethics, ensuring that spiritual practices do not overshadow the primary goals of social work.

Social worker 9 added, "When we respect their spiritual beliefs, it creates a sense of trust and emotional security. But we must always be mindful of not overstepping, as our role is to support, not to guide their spiritual journey." This highlights the importance of fostering trust and emotional safety while upholding professional integrity in spiritual coping.

#### *Inferences and analysis of theme 7.*

Social workers recognise the significant role of spiritual coping in supporting the families of international migrants but are equally aware of the need to balance this with professional ethics. They emphasise the importance of

offering spiritual practices as an optional resource, ensuring that their support does not infringe on the personal beliefs or autonomy of the families they assist.

## **Discussion**

The study examines how spiritual coping helps families of international migrants manage emotional challenges, particularly stress, anxiety, and grief. Prayer, meditation, and mindfulness provide immediate relief and long-term emotional stability (Shen, 2023). These practices help individuals regulate emotions, gain clarity, and maintain resilience (Sterle et al., 2018). Families describe spirituality as a source of strength and comfort, particularly during times of uncertainty. Social workers recognise the value of these coping mechanisms in supporting emotional wellbeing (Ellis et al., 2022).

Cultural and religious influences shape how families use spiritual coping. Family rituals, prayers, and guidance from spiritual leaders strengthen emotional bonds and provide stability. Many families continue long-standing traditions of worship and religious practices, which help them feel connected despite physical separation. Social workers encourage families to engage with faith-based support systems to enhance emotional wellbeing. Spiritual leaders play an important role by offering reassurance, guidance, and a sense of belonging (Duplantier & Williamson, 2023).

Integrating spirituality into social work has benefits but also challenges. Social workers see spiritual practices complementing evidence-based approaches, providing families with peace and continuity (Celano et al., 2021). However, they must also respect professional boundaries and the secular nature of their work. While encouraging families to draw on their faith, they remain mindful of not imposing beliefs and finding the right balance between supporting spiritual coping and maintaining professional neutrality.

Spiritual coping contributes to resilience, helping families cope with the difficulties of migration. Faith and shared practices provide emotional stability and hope, allowing families to endure long periods of separation. Many describe their faith as an anchor, strengthening them during difficult times. Rituals and prayers reinforce emotional endurance and foster a sense of unity, even when family members are apart. Social workers observe that spirituality gives families a sense of purpose and emotional grounding, helping them manage migration-related stress (Lusk et al., 2019).

The findings align with psychological theories of coping and resilience. Mindfulness-based acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) highlights self-awareness and acceptance as key to managing stress (Hayes, 2004; McLean & Follette, 2016). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping explained how individuals assess stress and choose responses, with spirituality as a resource for reframing difficulties. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory illustrates how family, social workers, and religious communities influence coping strategies. Frankl's (1946) logotherapy emphasises finding meaning in suffering, which many migrant families do through their faith. Resilience theory further supports that spiritual coping strengthens emotional endurance during hardship.

Despite its benefits, spiritual coping has limitations. Some social workers express concern that families may rely too heavily on faith, neglecting practical solutions. While spirituality offers comfort, it cannot replace essential resources such as healthcare, legal support, and education. Over-reliance on prayer or meditation without taking action can lead to frustration and emotional exhaustion. A balanced approach, combining spiritual coping with practical problem-solving, is necessary for long-term wellbeing.

Social workers acknowledge the positive impact of spiritual coping but remain aware

of their ethical responsibility to maintain professional boundaries. Many believe spiritual practices are key in supporting families but stress the importance of respecting individual beliefs. They aim to foster trust and emotional security while ensuring spirituality is introduced as an option rather than an obligation. Social workers can provide meaningful support by maintaining neutrality and professionalism without overstepping ethical guidelines.

Overall, spiritual coping is an essential source of emotional support for families of international migrants. It provides stability, comfort, and resilience, helping families manage separation challenges. However, it should complement, rather than replace, practical efforts to address migration-related difficulties. Social workers play a vital role in assisting families to find this balance, ensuring that spirituality remains a supportive resource rather than a sole solution.

### **Professional social work practice, role of social workers, and contribution to social work practice and intervention**

#### ***The context: social work in migrant support***

The context of this study lies in the challenges faced by families of blue-collar international migrants in Kerala, where social workers play a pivotal role in facilitating support mechanisms that address the emotional, social, and psychological needs of families affected by prolonged separation. In this study, the social workers were tasked with integrating spiritual coping strategies into their interventions to support families experiencing the stress of migration. Multifaceted stressors, including economic instability, family separation, and cultural adaptation, mark the migrant context. Social workers in this context serve as key facilitators of resilience, utilising spiritual coping mechanisms to provide emotional

and psychological support to families navigating these challenges.

Social work practice in such settings is deeply influenced by the complexity of migration dynamics, which often involve trauma, dislocation, and the need for ongoing emotional and psychological care. It is widely acknowledged that supporting migrant populations involves addressing their material needs and psychological and emotional well-being. This study builds on that foundation by exploring how social workers in Kerala use spiritual coping to mediate these challenges. The role of spirituality, particularly as it pertains to migrant support, reflects a growing recognition in social work that spiritual practices are not only integral to personal wellbeing but also play a significant role in professional practice, especially in contexts where clients experience considerable stress and trauma.

### ***The primary outcome: spiritual coping as a mechanism of resilience***

One of the central findings of this study is the positive role that spiritual coping mechanisms play in fostering resilience among both social workers and families of blue-collar international migrants. Social workers reported that spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and mindfulness provided a grounding force that allowed them to remain calm and focused amidst the chaos and trauma that often characterise the lives of families of blue-collar international migrants. This aligns with the broader body of research that supports the idea that spirituality can act as a protective factor against stress and burnout, enhancing resilience in high-pressure environments.

In social work, resilience is often seen as a critical factor in successful interventions, especially when dealing with vulnerable populations like migrants. Social workers who integrate spiritual coping into their practice report an increased ability to

manage their emotional responses, leading to more effective client interactions. This study supports the argument that spiritual coping is not just a personal tool for social workers but a professional one, contributing to the broader goals of social work interventions by enhancing emotional stability and the capacity to respond to client needs compassionately and effectively.

### ***The secondary outcome: challenges and limitations of spiritual coping***

While the benefits of spiritual coping were evident, the study also revealed the limitations and challenges associated with its integration into professional practice. Some social workers reported feelings of ostracism or discomfort when discussing their spiritual practices with colleagues, suggesting that there remains a stigma around spirituality within the social work profession. This is consistent with findings from other research that suggest spiritual practices can sometimes be seen as incompatible with the secular nature of social work. The tension between personal beliefs and professional boundaries is a challenge that many social workers face, mainly when working in multicultural and diverse settings where spiritual practices may differ significantly from those of their colleagues or clients.

Despite these challenges, the study indicates that when spiritual coping mechanisms are respected and integrated thoughtfully, they can enhance the overall effectiveness of social work interventions. This highlights the need for professional development and training in integrating spiritual coping into social work practice and creating a more inclusive environment of diverse spiritual beliefs. Social work practice should not shy away from addressing the spiritual dimensions of client care, as spirituality is often a significant aspect of individuals' coping mechanisms and resilience. As such, social workers must be equipped with the tools to navigate these complexities while focusing on client-centred care.

***The role of social workers: facilitators of spiritual coping***

Social workers in this study functioned as service providers and facilitators of spiritual coping strategies for families of blue-collar international migrants. They helped clients draw on their spiritual resources, guiding them to engage with their faith in ways that would help them cope with the stressors of migration. This reflects a growing recognition of social workers' role in promoting clients' holistic wellbeing, incorporating psychological and social interventions and spiritual support.

In practice, social workers must adopt a flexible, client-centred approach that recognises the importance of spiritual beliefs in the lives of families of blue-collar international migrants. This is particularly important in Kerala, where a significant portion of the population adheres to spiritual practices that may offer comfort and strength during times of adversity. Social workers can enhance their practice by learning to assess and integrate spiritual coping mechanisms into their interventions, thus providing more comprehensive support to families of blue-collar international migrants.

Furthermore, the study suggests that social workers can play a critical role in facilitating community support networks, both within migrant communities and across broader societal contexts. Helping clients build connections with others who share similar spiritual beliefs or practices enables social workers to create a sense of belonging and support, both essential for resilience. This community support can buffer migration stress's adverse effects, offering emotional and practical resources to help clients navigate their challenges.

***Contribution to social work practice and intervention***

Integrating spiritual coping into social work practice has significant implications for

the field, particularly in contexts involving families of blue-collar international migrants and other vulnerable populations. First, it highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach to social work that recognises the interconnection between wellbeing's psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. By incorporating spiritual coping mechanisms into interventions, social workers can enhance their ability to support clients comprehensively, addressing their immediate material needs and emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Second, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the role of spirituality in social work, challenging the traditional secular approach that has often excluded spiritual practices from professional interventions. The findings suggest that spirituality is not only a personal resource but also a professional one, enhancing the capacity of social workers to manage stress and remain effective in their practice. As such, there is a growing need for social work education and training programmes to incorporate spiritual competence, enabling practitioners to support better clients who rely on spiritual coping mechanisms.

Lastly, the study calls for a broader recognition of the importance of spiritual coping in social work interventions, particularly in multicultural and diverse settings. Social workers must be prepared to engage with clients' spiritual beliefs in a respectful and supportive manner, integrating these beliefs into their practice to promote holistic healing and wellbeing. By doing so, social workers can ensure that their interventions are effective, culturally sensitive, and responsive to their clients' needs.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to understanding how social workers can integrate spiritual coping strategies into their practice to

enhance the wellbeing of families of international migrants in Kerala. The findings suggest that spiritual coping mechanisms foster resilience, manage stress, and facilitate community support. While there are challenges in integrating spirituality into professional practice, the potential benefits for social workers and clients are significant. Embracing a holistic approach that incorporates spiritual dimensions allows social workers to offer more effective and culturally sensitive interventions, strengthening their support for families of international migrants as they face migration-related challenges. Social work practice must evolve to recognise and respect the spiritual needs of clients, and practitioners must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to integrate spiritual coping into their interventions.

## Statements & declaration

### **Acknowledgement: academic and spiritual positioning of the authors**

This study acknowledges how our academic and spiritual backgrounds shape our perspectives. As researchers, we adopt observational and participatory roles, engaging with participants to understand their experiences and beliefs. We approach the research with awareness of our biases and the diversity of spiritual fields in our study population, balancing academic rigor with personal reflection to ensure our findings are informed by scholarly inquiry and participants' lived experiences.

## Funding statement

The research presented in this work received no external funding.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests related to this research.

## Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to conceiving the research idea, conducting the literature review, and writing the manuscript. They also contributed to data analysis and interpretation and reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Received: 17 December

Accepted: 14 March

Published: 12 June 2025

## References

- Aggarwal, S., Wright, J., Morgan, A., Patton, G., & Reavley, N. (2023). Religiosity and spirituality in the prevention and management of depression and anxiety in young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-05091-2>
- Ahad, A. A., Sanchez-Gonzalez, M., & Junquera, P. (2023). Understanding and addressing mental health stigma across cultures for improving psychiatric care: A narrative review. *Cureus*. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.39549>
- Alkholy, R., Lovell, K., Bee, P., & Pedley, R. (2022). Barriers and enablers to help-seeking behaviour for mental health reasons among community-dwelling older adults with anxiety: A mixed-methods systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2022.100440>
- Andersen, L. M. B., Rasmussen, A. N., Reavley, N. J., Bøggild, H., & Overgaard, C. (2021). The social route to mental health: A systematic review and synthesis of theories linking social relationships to mental health to inform interventions. *SSM - Mental Health*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2021.100042>
- Andrade, A. S., Roca, J. S., & Pérez, S. R. (2023). Children's emotional and behavioural response following a migration: A scoping review. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2023.100176>
- Appiah, R., Raviola, G., & Weobong, B. (2024). Balancing ethics and culture: A scoping review of ethico-cultural and implementation challenges of the individual-based consent model in African research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 19(3), 143–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15562646241237669>
- Asadzadeh, A., Kötter, T., Fekete, A., Moghadas, M., Alizadeh, M., Zebardast, E., Weiss, D., Basirat, M., & Hutter, G. (2022). Urbanisation, migration, and the challenges of resilience thinking in urban planning: Insights from two contrasting planning systems in Germany and Iran. *Cities*, 125. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103642>
- Banerjee, S., Santos, L. L. D., & Hulgård, L. (2021). Intersectional knowledge as rural social innovation.



- Journal of Rural Studies*, 99, 252–261. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.04.007>
- Bjørlykhaug, K. I., Karlsson, B., Hesook, S. K., & Kleppe, L. C. (2021). Social support and recovery from mental health problems: A scoping review. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 12(5), 666–697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857x.2020.1868553>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Celano, T., Harris, S., Sawyer, A. T., & Hamilton, T. (2021). Promoting spiritual well-being among nurses. *Mental Health Nursing*, 42(4), 214–221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2021.08.002>
- Ciaramella, M., Monacelli, N., & Cocimano, L. C. E. (2021). Promotion of resilience in migrants: A systematic review of study and psychosocial intervention. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 24(5), 1328–1344. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01247-y>
- Coope, J., Barrett, A., Brown, B., Crossley, M., Raghavan, R., & Sivakami, M. (2020). Resilience, mental health and urban migrants: A narrative review. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 16(2), 137–159. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijmhsc-04-2019-0048>
- De Haene, L., & Rousseau, C. (2020). *Working with refugee families: Trauma and exile in family relationships*. Cambridge University Press.
- Drisko, J. W., & Grady, M. D. (2019). *Evidence-based practice in clinical social work*. Springer.
- Duplantier, S. C., & Williamson, F. A. (2023). Barriers and facilitators of health and well-being in informal caregivers of dementia patients: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054328>
- Ellis, H. M., Hook, J. N., Zuniga, S., Hodge, A. S., Ford, K. M., Davis, D. E., & Van Tongeren, D. R. (2022). Religious/spiritual abuse and trauma: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 9(4), 213–231. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000301>
- Ermansons, G., Kienzler, H., Asif, Z., & Schofield, P. (2023). Refugee mental health and the role of place in the Global North countries: A scoping review. *Health & Place*, 79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2023.102964>
- Firdaus, G. (2017). The mental well-being of migrants in the urban centre of India: Analyzing the role of the social environment. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 59(2). [https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.indianjpsychiatry\\_272\\_15](https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.indianjpsychiatry_272_15)
- Francoeur, R. B., Burke, N., & Wilson, A. M. (2016). The role of social workers in spiritual care to facilitate coping with chronic illness and self-determination in advance care planning. *Social Work in Public Health*, 31(5), 453–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2016.1146199>
- Frankl, V. E. (1946). *Man's search for meaning* (IN. Lesch, Trans) Beacon Press. (Original work published 1946)
- Greaves, L. M., Latimer, C. L., Li, E., & Hamley, L. (2023). Well-being and cultural identity for Māori: Knowledge of iwi (tribal) affiliations does not strongly relate to health and social service outcomes. *Social Science & Medicine*, 329. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116028>
- Gümüşay, A. A., Smets, M., & Morris, T. (2019). God at work: Engaging central and incompatible institutional logics through elastic hybridity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 63(1), 124–154. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0481>
- Hasan, S. I., Yee, A., Rinaldi, A., Azham, A. A., Hairi, F. M., & Nordin, A. S. A. (2021). Prevalence of common mental health issues among migrant workers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 16(12). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260221>
- Hayes, S. C. (2004). Acceptance and commitment therapy, relational frame theory, and the third wave of behavioral and cognitive therapies. *Behaviour Therapy*, 35(4), 639–665. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0005-7894\(04\)80013-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0005-7894(04)80013-3)
- Iyer, K., Gupta, P., Sapre, S., Pawar, T., Gala, P., Kapoor, H., Kalahasthi, R., Ticku, A., Kulkarni, S., & Iyer, P. (2023). Mental health resources, barriers, and intervention needs among women in rural Maharashtra, India: A qualitative study. *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2023.78>
- Jones, R. A. (1986). *Émile Durkheim: An introduction to four major works*. Sage Publications.
- Kienzler, H., Massazza, A., Kuykendall, R., Tamimi, N., Hammoudeh, W., & Giacaman, R. (2024). Uncertainty and mental health: A qualitative scoping review. *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2024.100521>
- Kumar, P., & Pramod, S. K. (2016). *Psychological problems of migrant labourers in Kerala: A study in Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam districts*. The Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment (KILE). <https://kile.kerala.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sunilkumar.pdf>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer Publishing.
- Liddell, B. J., Batch, N., Hellyer, S., Bulnes-Diez, M., Kamte, A., Klassen, C., Wong, J., Byrow, Y., & Nickerson, A. (2022). Understanding the effects of being separated from family on refugees in Australia: A qualitative study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 46(5), 647–653. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13232>
- Lockhart, C., Houkamau, C. A., Sibley, C. G., & Osborne, D. (2019). To be at one with the land: Māori spirituality predicts greater environmental regard. *Religions*, 10(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070427>
- Lusk, M., Terrazas, S., Caro, J., Chaparro, P., & Puga Antúnez, D. (2019). Resilience, faith, and social supports among migrants and refugees from Central America and Mexico. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 23(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2019.1620668>
- Mandelkow, L., Frick, E., Büsing, A., & Reme, S. E. (2021). Norwegian psychotherapy: Religiosity gap and spiritual care competence. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 24(4), 359–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2021.1938343>
- Matlin, S. A., Depoux, A., Schütte, S., Flahault, A., & Saso, L. (2018). Migrants' and refugees' health: Towards an agenda of solutions. *Public Health Reviews*, 39(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-018-0104-9>
- McLean, C., & Follette, V. M. (2016). Acceptance and commitment therapy as a nonpathologizing intervention approach for survivors of trauma. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 17(2), 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2016.1103111>

- Olcese, M., Cardinali, P., Madera, F., Camilleri, A. P., & Migliorini, L. (2023). Migration and community resilience: A scoping review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101924>
- Omelchenko, D., Maximova, S., & Molodikova, I. (2018). Risks of international migration and integration policy Asian borderland (On the results of sociological research in the Altai Territory). *Society and Security Insights*, 3, 53–77. [https://doi.org/10.14258/ssi\(2018\)3-03](https://doi.org/10.14258/ssi(2018)3-03)
- Rajan, S. I. (2023). *India migration report 2020: Kerala model of migration surveys*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/India-Migration-Report-2020-Kerala-Model-of-Migration-Surveys/Rajan/p/book/9780367625696>
- Sari, R. Y., Muhith, A., Rohmawati, R., Soleha, U., Faizah, I., Afriyah, R. K., & Rahman, F. S. (2021). Spiritual emotional freedom technique against anxiety and psychological well-being of Type 2 DM patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Open Access Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 9(G), 260–265. <https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2021.7217>
- Shen, R. (2023). The effects of psychosocial factors on international students' mental health and relevant interventions. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 157. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202315701021>
- Tabor, W., Madison, K., Marler, L. E., & Kellermanns, F. W. (2019). The effects of spiritual leadership in family firms: A conservation of resources perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 163(4), 729–743. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04379-2>
- Taha, S., Anabtawi, M., & Wreidat, T. A. (2024). Silent suffering: The hidden challenges confronting unaccompanied refugee children through the eyes of social workers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106868>
- Taute, N., Morgan, T. K. K. B., Ingham, J., Archer, R., & Fa'au, T. (2023). Cultural sustainability thresholds to measure the mauri of Indigenous Māori values impacted by geothermal engineering projects. *Environmental and Sustainability Indicators*, 20, 100303. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indic.2023.100303>
- Tavares, A. P., Martins, H., Pinto, S., Caldeira, S., Sousa, P. P., & Rodgers, B. (2022). Spiritual comfort, spiritual support, and spiritual care: A simultaneous concept analysis. *Nursing Forum*, 57(6), 1559–1566. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12845>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Willemse, S., Smeets, W., Van Leeuwen, E., Nielen-Rosier, T., Janssen, L., & Foudraïne, N. (2020). Spiritual care in the intensive care unit: An integrative literature research. *Journal of Critical Care*, 57, 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrc.2020.01.026>
- Williams, A. D., Clark, T. C., & Lewycka, S. (2018). The associations between cultural identity and mental health outcomes for Indigenous Māori youth in New Zealand. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2018.00319>
- Wilson, D., Moloney, E., Parr, J. M., Aspinall, C., & Slark, J. (2021). Creating an Indigenous Māori-centred model of relational health: A literature review of Māori models of health. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 30(23–24), 3539–3555. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15859>
- World Health Organization. (2023). *Mental health of refugees and migrants: Risk and protective factors and access to care*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240081840>
- Yantzi, R., Hadiuzzaman, M., Gupta, P. K. S., Lamrous, A., Richardson, K., Pringle, J., Schwartz, L., Hossain, P., Kizito, D., & Burza, S. (2023). Doing our best and doing no harm: A focused ethnography of staff moral experiences of providing palliative care at a Médecins Sans Frontières pediatric hospital in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. *PLoS ONE*, 18(7). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0288938>