

INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA

Fatima TAUSEEF¹
Mridula CHAUHAN²

Abstract

The neo-liberal model of development has facilitated the cross-border movements, thereby making both national and international migration one of the survival strategies to fight against persistent poverty, economic insecurity and deepening inequalities. It is known to all that Covid-19 and lockdown measures had a large impact on employment and labour market affecting human lives across the globe. This paper focuses on the experiences of women migrant workers situated within one of the most populous states of India, i.e., Uttar Pradesh. How did they make sense of their lived realities in the face of downsizing being done by the companies, which meant partial wages or losing the jobs permanently, and also the sudden transition that they had to opt for and negotiate with?

Keywords: Migration, Women, Covid-19, Lockdown, India

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2021/17/2.02

1. Introduction

“Migration is an expression of the human aspiration for dignity, safety and better future. It is the part of the social fabric, part of our very make-up as a human family.”- Ban Ki-Moon³

The Covid-19 pandemic, which led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis for the majority of the people all over the world, has severe implications for those who are situated at the lowest rung of the labour market. Increasing joblessness, income and food insecurity, massive dislocation of migrant workers resulting in brutal hardships and even deaths constitute sufficient evidence of the precariousness of the current situation.

Migration as a phenomenon has always been an inseparable reality of human existence. People’s movement from one place to another is a marked feature of human civilization. Migration as a phenomenon is a product of and has an impact on the socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of a particular society in a given time-frame.

¹ Fatima Tauseef, Centre for Women's Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, tauseeffatima21@yahoo.com

² Mridula Chauhan, Department of Adult Continuing and Extension Education, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, mridulachauhan42@gmail.com

³ Ban Ki Moon was the former Secretary General of the United Nations. “Secretary-General's remarks to High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development,” 03 Oct 2013, retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2013-10-03/secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-dialogue-international>. Accessed on 21/10/2021.

The United Nations Multilingual Demographic Dictionary defines ‘migration’ as “a form of geographical mobility or spatial mobility between one geographical unit and another”. (United Nations, 1956: 187) The different parameters of identities such as caste, class, region, religion, gender do influence the experiences of migration. There exists an inextricable link between the process of migration and employment. One can also see that globalization has accelerated both the transnational and internal migration facilitated by the technological advancement, market deregulation, and economic liberalization. Over the passage of time, several studies explicate the diverse migration patterns in terms of voluntarist perspective, i.e. push and pull factors, and from structuralist perspective i.e., in terms of centre-periphery, industrialized-peasant based, west and north-east and south (Arya and Roy, 2006: 14). However, recently, a more holistic approach has been developed so as to understand the multiple layers attached to the phenomenon of migration such as race, religion, class, gender, nationality, poverty, human trafficking, refugee protection laws, human rights and so on.

Along with the advent of the neo-liberal model of development, the feminization of labour force has gained momentum along with intensification in the process of women’s migration and generation of more avenues of employment. However, these avenues do reinforce the traditional notions of gender division of labour, where it is seen that migrant married and unmarried women from some of the developing countries supply their labour and work as domestic and day care workers in the high- income countries of the world. Therefore, one of the aspects of migration can be understood within the context of emergence of care economy, where one of the implications is “extraction of care from global south to global north”. (Beneria, 2003: 82) ILO’s (International Labour Organization) Convention on Domestic Workers, 2011 provides international labour standards concerning decent work for domestic workers, further establishing the linkages between domestic work and female international labour migration. In case of internal migration, domestic work seems to be perceived as one of the strategies of survival for poor illiterate women, especially in the context of rural-urban migration. Thus, it can be said that migrant women workers are concentrated in certain specific jobs situated at the bottom end of the deeply hierarchical labour market, predominantly marked by informality. The informal labour processes are a result of the outsourcing and sub-contracting within the production process leading to exploitative and precarious working conditions.

A gendered analysis of migration informs us that women may migrate alone or along with their families or communities, either in search of better livelihood options or often they opt for migration as a means to escape from oppressive familial or marital structures. However, it has been a matter of debate to what extent migration enabled these women to challenge patriarchal construct of their society and further facilitated their autonomy and independence.

The present paper locates itself within the intricacies of labour, gender and migration, mapping the participation of women in the urban labour market examining both primary and secondary sources.

Women's concentration within the labour market is predominantly in forms of engagement in home-based production, self-employed work, casual and contract labour, seasonal agricultural labour etc. The uncertainties and risk associated with migration do have gendered implications as well.

2. Literature Review

The existing literature on the issue of women workers, informalization and migration has dealt with several nuances of the marginalization of these workers within the larger societal structure. Arya and Roy (2006) trace the contribution of women migrants to the national economy. They explore the experiences of migrant women workers trapped in the vicious circle of poverty and powerlessness, further augmenting their inequalities and vulnerabilities.

In another work, Roy (2010) examines the legislative measures and judicial decisions within the Indian context to assert the gendered aspects of citizenship and also emphasize upon the issue how citizenship enacts and unfolds differently to people having different social positioning. She also highlights the linkages between citizenship and migration providing a background of the migration from Bangladesh. Nauriyal, Negi and Gairola (2019) focused on the profound impact of migration on individual women and their households in hilly areas, particularly in Garhwal regions, focusing on the complex challenge of kinship dynamics within the familial structures. Wives are left behind in their homestead after men migrate from Uttarakhand (one of the twenty-eight states in India) to other parts of the country. In their work, an understanding of the linkages between gender and mobility in rural north India is developed.

Further, Kumar and Chodhary (2021) analysed the current situation as well as lacunae within the administrative response and the steps taken up by the Indian government (leading to Lockdown measures in four phases from March to May, 2020) which enhanced the plight of informal migrant workers in India.

Coming to the global level dynamics, Meghani (2016) dealt with the flaws in the neoliberal development paradigm and its model of social security and examines the condition of low skilled female migrant labourers from the south, migrating to the global north. She used a multidisciplinary approach in her analysis and performed her analysis through data, case studies and official documents in a systematic and structured way.

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

3.1 Research objectives

- To analyse the influence of income on the saving pattern of migrant workers and their perspective towards present pandemic situation.
- To explore the possibilities of migrant workers to improve their livelihood opportunities and examine their lived realities during these times of distress.
- To provide an intersectional analysis of various modes of discrimination faced by women migrant workers, both within the private and public sphere.

3.2 Research Methodology

The study undertaken here aims to examine the experiences of women migrant workers mostly concentrated in the informal sector during the first phase of Covid-19 and resultant lockdown measures (from March to May, 2020) followed by the steps leading to Unlock in different segments (from June to November, 2020). Forty emigrant women workers were interviewed through teleconferencing in order to understand their problems and challenges, where the questions included in the interview schedule were open ended. The study was conducted in two phases, firstly from April to June, 2020, and then a follow-up investigation was made in May, 2021 to observe the transition in the lives of these workers. On 24th March, 2020 the government of India called for a complete lockdown of 21 days to break the covid 19 infection cycle. This led to the millions of migrant workers moving back from cities to their native places. Visual representation of exodus of stranded and desperate migrant workers captured by the print and electronic media is one of the gruesome realities driven by the pandemic. It was seen that huge number of migrant labourers reached their destinations by buses, tractors, trucks and some in the absence of any mode of transportation had to cover long distances by foot. In the face of this crisis, the resilience of the public health system in India was put to test, and through the public health system in Bareilly district within the state of Uttar Pradesh, the data was collected. The government had to make a mandatory rule that the migrant workers can't enter their villages without covid-19 screening and testing. These working poor went back to their native places, mostly different villages in Bareilly district. The research area selected for the study is Bareilly, as it has the potential to cater the patients coming from the adjacent districts in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous and badly affected state during the pandemic. Here, out of the total respondents, three representative case studies are discussed to explicate the lived realities of women migrant workers, and to understand how their gender makes an impact on the negotiations that they make within the labour market and

within the larger societal context. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that it connects micro level ground realities to the national and global framework during the pandemic. It comes out that informal women workers in the urban labour market have borne the brunt of the pandemic, not only in India rather in most of the developing countries of the world who had witnessed expansion of the informal sector in response to the neoliberal model of economic development.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Case Study 1 (Original Names Have Been Changed)

Javitri Devi (Mother, 55 years) Sapna (Daughter, 18 years old)

This mother-daughter duo is from Bareilly district and belong to scheduled caste, the lowest in the caste structure that prevails in India. They work in a pharmaceutical unit at Baddi, an industrial town in Solan district of Himachal Pradesh.⁴ Baddi is home for manufacturing plants of many big pharmaceutical companies. Baddi- Barotwiala- Nalagarh consists of 700 manufacturing units and is also considered as major pharmaceutical hub in the country. In our sample, we found that most of the migrant labourers from Bareilly and other districts of Uttar Pradesh work in these units as informal workers. The informalization of employment has obviously exacerbated the precariousness of their jobs.

Their apathy is evident from the fact that both Sapna and Javitri Devi did not know anything about their employer. Javitri Devi is illiterate, whereas Sapna has attained formal education till VIII grade. Sapna is assertive and is able to speak her mind, while her mother keeps monitoring the information provided by her. However, it also needs to be noted here that she does not have control over the money that she earns. She gives it to her brother and he decides how to spend it. It reflects clearly within the patriarchal construct of society, the ability to earn and the control over resources are two distinct ideas, and for attaining self-reliance and economic independence, the engagement in the income generating activities has to be accompanied by the control over resources. Sapna feels ease in her dependence on her brother for the fulfilment of all her basic needs, be it clothes or any other necessity, as conformity to such notions is required for the construct of an 'ideal woman'. The ideal women in a patriarchal society has to be passive, docile and submissive.

Sapna also has two brothers working and living with them at Baddi. However, her father stays back at Bareilly, and due to his illness, he is not able to earn, so they send money back to their father. Sapna has this dream of constructing her house

⁴ The Indian Express, May 11, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/with-rs-30k-cr-turnover-baddi-emerges-global-pharma-hub-2786853/> Accessed on 04/06/2021

and renovating it properly. It is interesting to note here that to avoid social ridicule, mother- daughter went back to their native place after lockdown was imposed, whereas the brothers stayed back at Baddi. It reinforces the patriarchal notion that the responsibility of caregiving gets incurred on the shoulders of women and cuts across all the barriers of class, caste, region etc. and is tied crucially to the identities of working women as well.

They do the work of labelling and packaging the medicines, for which mother gets INR 8000 month, whereas Sapna gets INR 10000 month. She also reports for the absence of any unionization or any other platform so as to enhance their collective bargaining power. According to Sapna, in the last 5 years, she has received an increment of only INR 2000. It also comes out that at the workplace, cameras are installed. One finds separate toilets for men and women workers. Medicine and other first aid services are provided in case of minor ailments. However, for maternity leave or other such social security benefits, accountability does not lie on the employer. Long working hours seem to be the norm when it comes to informal workforce. For Sapna and Javitri Devi also, their work starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. The neglect of the informal workers can be gauged from the fact that despite contributing significantly to the nation's economy, their working conditions are miserable.

During the second phase of the investigation conducted in May, 2021, it was found that Sapna and her mother could not return to the pharmaceutical manufacturing unit, where they used to work. All their savings were spent on fulfilling daily needs of the entire family. It was also seen that the two brothers also came back to their hometown, and now the family survives on the earnings of one brother, who still works at New Delhi. It can be said that Sapna, and many other informal workers like her, could not go back to their workplace, and therefore, the pandemic has aggravated their struggles for survival. The uncertainties associated with the informal sector have made the mother-daughter search for government jobs. They have this desire to get absorbed as workers in various community toilet schemes run by the Indian government. It becomes important to note here, that even in their personal and social aspirations, the identity affiliation and their positioning within the caste structure gets reflected, as the caste system in India plays a crucial role in conceptualization of the sense of self that one possesses. Caste acts as one of the parameters of identity formation and becomes one of causal factors for the hierarchical divisions in the Indian society. The system divides Hindus into four main categories, Brahmins (teachers and intellectuals), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (menial jobs). The caste structure rests privileges to those who belong to upper castes, while inflicting disadvantages and repression for the lower caste people. Sapna and her mother belonged to Shudra caste, i.e. lowest among the complex hierarchy, who were assumed to do the menial jobs. One can discern the irony that despite the prohibition on caste-based discrimination that the Constitution of India provides for in its Fundamental Rights, how people's lived

realities are still connected to the historical injustices.

4.2 Case Study 2 (Original Name Has Been Changed)

Sajida (35 years old)

As reported by Employment Relationship Survey, jointly carried out by Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal, International Labour Organization, and UNICEF, migrant workers represent a high proportion of workers in brick kiln industry in Nepal, where a major proportion, i.e. 46% of workers have migrated from India.⁵ Among the workers who have migrated from India and work in Nepal's brick industry, one of them is Sajida, a Muslim widow and a mother of five children, two sons and three daughters. Her life reflects the uncertainties and vulnerabilities that single women have to come across in our society. Working in Nepal as a migrant worker has fallen on her as a circumstantial reality, when she had to accompany most of the people in her village, who were leaving for Nepal.

The wages that she earns tells the tale of her sufferings, when for making 1000 bricks, all that she could earn is Rs. 650/. She lives in a *kachcha* house (made up of wood, mud, straw, dry leaves etc.) in the field itself which fails to save her from heavy rains or chilly winters. While coming back to Bareilly from Nepal after the lockdown, she had gone through a lot of trauma, when she was compelled to wait at the international border for 4 days and during that period she and her children could not be well fed. At the workplace, she has remained engaged in the backbreaking work from 6 a.m. till 6 p.m. Her youngest daughter is mentally retarded. She even asked for monetary assistance for the marriage of her daughters. As an illiterate woman, she has no awareness of minimum wages, working hours or minimum working conditions. It was found that her illiteracy, unawareness of her rights and absence of any collective for raising labourers' concerns resulted in augmentation of inequalities and exploitation of these workers. She worked there continuously for eight months and is unsure of going back to her workplace. It is reported that after the 2015 earthquakes, the construction industry in Nepal expanded, and thereby increasing the patterns of season work migration into the brick kiln industry.

However, we could not trace her during the second phase of our study, it was found that the workers engaged within the brick kiln industry could not go back to their place of work post lockdown.

⁵ ILO, UNICEF and CBS Nepal. 2021. Ending forced and child labour in Nepal's brick industry - Need for a holistic approach. <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/ending-forced-and-child-labour-nepals-brick-industry-need-holistic-approach>. Accessed on 04/06/2021.

4.3 Case Study 3 (Original Name Has Been Changed)

Jamuna Devi (35 years old) and Girish (27 years old)

Here, it is seen that Jamuna Devi has migrated to the historic city of Panipat in one of the nearby states, Haryana, along with her younger brother-in-law. It needs to be noted down here that in both national and transnational migration, women migrant workers depend upon informal social support system from family and friends. Panipat is globally known the 'Textile city' consisting of 30,000 small and big units with approximately 3 lakh labourers.⁶ Despite being a centre of handloom products, the industrial areas in the city are deprived of basic amenities such as availability of clean water, proper sanitation, proper sewage system, well-lit streets, maintenance of just and humane working conditions etc.

Jamuna Devi complains of the presence of common toilets for both men and women workers within the factory premises. As per the patterns with the informal workers, they don't get any medical leave, maternity benefits or any social security benefits; moreover, if leave is taken due to sickness, their wages get deducted. In her narrative also, we find the presence of the construct of 'ideal woman' when she states that the strong character of a woman in itself ensures her safety. She also states that women especially don't go out in the public sphere and work willingly, as it is only due to the circumstantial factors that they get compelled to work outside. Her narrative reflects how the notion of domestic sphere as natural for women gets internalized by the socialization process and cuts across the boundaries of class, caste, religion, age etc.

In the second phase of the study, we could not establish connection with some of the migrant workers as they were not available on the mobile numbers that they had with them during the first phase of the pandemic. Among the rest of the respondents, it was found that only a few went back to their places of work, that too, after spending almost a year at their native places. Thus, it can be said that the economic crisis occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic has hit hard the aspirations of the informal migrant workers, not only in India, but in several other countries of the developing world specifically.

5. Conclusion

The paper suggests the need to opt for a gender lens in formulating policies and addressing the vulnerabilities of migrant workers in India, such as the National Policy on Migrant Workers. For improving the current situation, the central government announced the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self-Reliant India),

⁶ The Tribune Voice of the People, May 11, 2021 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryanatribune/welcome-to-panipat-%E2%80%94-haryanas-textile-hub-48747> Accessed on 04/06/2021.

under which government puts efforts to improve the conditions of migrant workers and people from the marginalized groups during the pandemic. It was observed in our study that even during the lockdown some migrant workers benefited from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), but when it comes to women migrant workers, they are still struggling for their rights, benefits and are trapped in survival strategies.

The interactions with these women migrant workers reveal their helplessness regarding their future, where despite their willingness to go back to their workplaces, in most of the cases they are not able to return and become the worst sufferers of the economic downturn during the pandemic. Loss of jobs in case of the workers who dared to go back to their workplaces, lack of collective will and community support to return in search of work made these women decide to stay at their native places. Whatever savings they had with them, it all got finished during their journey and managing expenses at home. To decrease the risk and vulnerabilities of migrant workers, the government should follow the strict implication of policies and programmes ensuring the rights and protection of migrant workers in general and addressing the specific needs of women workers. Women informal workers consist of workers engaged in diverse set of economic activities, which is unprotected and unregulated, so it is the pressing need of the time to build solidarity and collectivization among these workers to make their voices heard. Here, it is also recommended that persistent involvement of multiple stakeholders at various levels, be it government agencies, voluntary organizations, worker's associations, independent researchers etc.

References and bibliography

- Arya, S. and A. Roy (eds.).** 2006. *Poverty, Gender and Migration*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beneria, L.** 2003. *Gender, Development, and Globalization Economics as if All People Mattered*, New York: Routledge.
- ILO, UNICEF and CBS Nepal.** 2021. "Ending forced and child labour in Nepal's brick industry – Need for a holistic approach". Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/ending-forced-and-child-labour-nepals-brick-industry-need-holistic-approach>. Accessed on 4 June 2021.
- Kumar, S. and S. Chodhary.** 2021. "Migrant workers and human rights: A critical study on India's COVID-19 Lockdown Policy", in *Social Science & Humanities Open*, 13 (1): 100-130.
- Meghani, Z. (ed.).** 2016. *Women Migrant Workers Ethical Political and Legal Problems*, New York: Routledge.
- Nauriyal, D.K., N.S. Negi and R.K. Gairola (eds.).** 2019. *Migration, Gender and Home Economics in Rural North India*, India: Routledge.
- Roy, A.** 2010. *Mapping Citizenship in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, A.** May 6, 2016. "With Rs 30K cr turnover, Baddi emerges global

pharma hub”, Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/with-rs-30k-cr-turnover-baddi-emerges-global-pharma-hub-2786853/>. Accessed on 4 June 2021.

Sharma, R.K. 2007. *Demography and Population Problems*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

The Indian Express, May 11, 2021. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/with-rs-30k-cr-turnover-baddi-emerges-global-pharma-hub-2786853/>. Accessed on 4 June 2021.

The Tribune Voice of the People, May 11, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryanatribune/welcome-to-panipat-%E2%80%94-haryanas-textile-hub-48747>. Accessed on 4 July 2021.

“Secretary-General's remarks to High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development,” 03 October 2013, retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2013-10-03/secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-dialogue-international>. Accessed on 21/10/2021.

The authors

Fatima Tauseef is working as an Assistant Professor at Centre for Women's Studies, Aligarh Muslim University. She has also taught as a Guest Lecturer at Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow. She is PhD in Women's Studies, and has also completed B.A.LL.B. (Hons.). She has qualified JRF, and has also won several awards for various research papers. She takes interest in issues relating to women's lived realities, and has worked at the grassroots with various organizations along with script writing and directing street plays for gender sensitization and outreach programmes. She believes in engaging with the young minds through conducting workshops on gender issues at schools and colleges.

Mridula Chauhan is guest faculty in the Department of Adult Continuing and Extension Education, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly where she is teaching P.G Diploma in Women Empowerment and Development. She completed her PhD from Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. Her areas of specialization are issues of Gender and Women in the Education System.