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Urban informal work & women migrants in the construction sector: From frying pan to the oven? (Sociological critique on women migrant labourers in urban areas)

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Abstract
A notable trend in the developing world in the past few decades is the rising numbers of internal female labour migration. Globalization and related processes have had a strong impact on female mobility patterns changing the major impetus for female migration from social to economic reasons. However, women migrants are more vulnerable than their male counterparts in the place of destination, because of their sexuality, gender-based division of labour proving risky for their physical safety, health, child care and meeting daily basic amenities.
Despites all this significance, women's migration is not sufficiently recognised by sociologists in their studies on migration. The domination of existing economic theories viewing women as family dependents or accompanying husband after marriage is one and prominent reason for this. Such gender bias in the analysis of migration patterns, their contribution and dynamics of migration have significant sociological insights critical for measuring overall development.
This paper argues that women's internal migration is a matter of much significance in understanding the socio-economic development, its scope in poverty reduction, promotion of social transformation in the household and broader society. Greater participation by women in the urban workforce also adds pace to the achievement of many Developmental Goals. An attempt is made here to present a few critical observations based on insights from a study of immigrant construction labourers from Kalyana Karnataka in Bengaluru city.

Keywords: Internal Migration & Women, Globalization, Socio-economic Development, Vulnerability

Introduction

Preamble

Sociological studies on migration and its impact on socio-economic transformation began during the middle part of the 20th century. It was mainly as a response to the large-scale emigration of the poor, and landless people to seek wage labour in nearby towns and cities. Sociologists regarded this process as evolving due to changes caused by the twin processes of industrialization and consequent urbanization (Srinivas 1970, 1972 & 1956; Rao, MSA 1990; Beteille 1974) [27, 29, 28, 20, 4].

The whole of the second half of the 20th century found several classic works on not only migration by also on its consequential processes related to caste-based social transformation, mobility of lower and former untouchable castes, non-farm work etc. Mobility among women as a reault of these changes failed to attract attention till the 1970s-80s. It was also because gender was not yet a strong subject in social sciences. But soon after the declaraton of the International Year (& decade) of the Women, 1975-1985, the 1990s and thereafter witnessed a thorough overhaul in studying women's participation in the labour force; this was particularly necessary due to new development caused by the introduction of globalization and its sister processes of Privatization and Liberalization led by Structural Adjustment Policies, which not only impacted the whole society everywhere in the world, but in developing societies such as India.

Women's Empowerment in Post-Independent India

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the international year and decade of women, 1975 laid the path for women's empowerment and development. The later decades witnessed several programmes and policies in the above direction. Women's self-help groups were formed under DWCRA programme in the mid-1980s and later labelled as *Stree Shakti Yojana in 2000-01*. While this was a major step towards uplifting rural women through income generating activities with the support of credit, bank linkage and resources/inputs, the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1993 through an Act provided women a great entry into political leadership from being mere voters before. Seats were reserved in their favour in all the tiers of the rural panchayats and *Nagara Palikas* and Municipalities. Besides the exclusive programmes for women, other employment generation schemes such as the flagship programme of the central government, MGNREGA/S (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme) was launched in 2006 with several objectives. The equal opportunity offered by programmes like MGNREGA and others encouraged women to set out in larger numbers to participate in the labour market leading to their visibility, but still access to their wages was not complete due to patriarchal norms. Barriers to women's empowerment and entitlement have continued in the rural areas especially despite revolutionary changes in the villages with the introduction of reservation for them in local bodies/grama to zilla panchayats, membership in self-help groups and school development monitoring committees (SDMCs) etc.

Objectives of the Paper

Women's entry into the labour market, visibly as earners of income is influenced by several recent socio-economic factors relating to development. They are no longer passive contributors but their role is increasingly becoming important for the household, whether in the family or outside. The present paper is an attempt to critically look at the issue of women among urban migrants. The specific objectives of the paper are to take:

1. An overview of the trends and patterns of women's migration;
2. To trace the causes or determinants of such female migration; and
3. © To discuss the positive and negative aspects of such migrant women labourers to urban areas

Methodology

The study has drawn insights from a study of construction labourers from the Hyderabad Karnataka Area in the city of Bengaluru. They are construction workers from the different taluks and villages of the 7 districts falling under the jurisdiction of this backward region. The study was undertaken for preparing a doctoral thesis. For the purposes of this paper, insights gathered after discussions with the family women of these male migrants who have accompanied them form the basis of our observations. They have accompanied their husbands to assist them in construction work and also for cooking food, and take care of related domestic work/help. Discussions with a few women migrants has revealed that most of them are from SC and low-income families from the HK region. They have migrated primarily due to available employment opportunities for their husbands. and not so much for themselves. This is called in literature as "associational migration". But after a few months of settling down, they have begun to seek domestic (house-maid's) work or engage in low-wage part-time jobs all in the unorganized sector. This is to bring home some additional income.

Women's Migration: Causes and Factors

The Indian census 2011 has documented that around 309 million migrants existed based on the place of their last residence. Of them, women accounted for about 91 million. This magnitude of women's representation is critical for the socio-economic development of the country with a great potential for poverty reduction, and change leading to progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. But despite this large-scale presence in migrant population, the problems and prospects of women migrants is not sufficiently explored in migration studies.

Why are women not reflected adequately in migration studies?

There is the argument that the neglect of research on women migrants is to be attributed to the emphasis placed by the existing theories of migration on factors which are mostly economic in nature. Women who tend to migrate are primarily considered to be doing so only for assisting migrating male members of the family, and for marriage & familial reasons. Such marital or dependent status of women migrants is put forth by Bose (1973) [6], Premi (1979) [18], Nangia *et al.* (1990) [15] and others. Also, gender bias in the study of migration has historical, socio-cultural, and economic ramifications and unfortunate that the dynamics of female migration is unexplored.

Economic Significance of Women's Migration

The women migrants being considered by studies as mere dependents or associational migrants, the worse result is ignoring their economic contribution to their households and society. However, scholars like Connell (1984) [7] have investigated the aspects of female migration as a primary response to real and perceived spatial inequalities exhibited in socio-economic opportunities, which themselves are the result of uneven sectoral or regional development.

Impact of Globalization on Female Migration

Recent realisation by some scholars has upheld the fact that post reforms decades, i.e., after the introduction of structural adjustment policies (SAP), Globalization, Liberalization and Privatization in the early 1990s, there is a shift in the pattern of migration of women. What is striking is that not only the poor women but those from all socio-economic background are found migrating. As a result, there is a variety or heterogeneity in the trends and patterns of migration. These patterns are also found to be changing – increasingly women migrate to undertake employment (Sharma 1986, Shanti 1991, Sundari 2004) [25, 30]. The following factors have been put forth to be leading to this transformation.

1. **Technological Development:** More and more mechanization and technology introduced in agriculture has led to displacement of women workers. Araya (2005) has stated that this is due to poor economic conditions of women particularly women from SC and other vulnerable communities are forced to migrate out from villages;
2. **Globalization is supposed to have given rise to gender segregated labour markets (Shanti 2006) [24]:**

Some production units like garment industries, small scale processing of food and other items, export processing works have opened up opportunities for women to migrate.

Trends and Patterns of Women's Migration

Now that the new millennium has witnessed continued migration of women that was started during the last 3-4 decades of the 20th century, and it is seeing much acceleration. This increase in their number and importance is caused by the rapid transformation of Indian economy due to liberalization and globalization policies and consequent processes of socio-economic adaptation and change. Women's educational attainments have gained a momentum sending them to cities (and even abroad) for higher studies and employment. Likewise, for the still lowly educated and poor, loss of agricultural and even non-farm wage work in native places, have put them in the lap of urban informal labour. Improvement in transportation and communication facilities, urban expansion and creation of peri-urban areas, inclusion of many villages into the urban fringe of metropolitan areas-all these have shifted the workforce from agriculture to industries, service, manufacturing, and processing sectors, especially absorbing women in large numbers (Bhagat 2009) [5].

Further, the magnitude of women's migration has increased over a period from 1971-2011. This has led to coining the term 'feminization of migration' (Oishi 2002) [17]. The important reasons identified by scholars (Sundari, 2004) [30] for such a development are as follows:

1. Globalization.
2. Emergence of gender specific labour market.
3. Extreme poverty.
4. Mechanization of agriculture.
5. Environmental degradation etc.

Factors Influencing Migration

The post-reforms period has not only sent more women on migratory work, but it has also increased the already high male population among such immigrants. There are two ways of studying them. One is recognized by scholars as being spatial or distance covered in migration. The other factor that has influenced it is the stream of migration.

1. Internal Migration for Work

Based on administrative boundaries crossed, internal migration is classified as being intra-district, inter-district, and inter-state. Experts have identified four types here, based on factors influencing them. They are Rural to Rural, Rural to Urban, Urban to Rural and Urban to Urban. Of these Rural to Urban is the most dominant one with many women and men being such migrants. What is significant is that women's migration is no longer for marriage but for work. Literature has highlighted the preponderance of women in rural-to-rural stream and across distances. Earlier, this was explained mostly in terms of marriage-based interaction.

In contrast to the above (marriage-based migration), micro-level studies have pointed towards the increasing role of changing agrarian practices, fall of fluctuations in agricultural prices, land-labour utilisation practices changed due to mechanization, commercial crops, skill based agricultural labour, caste-based oppression of the dependent castes by the dominant and large farmers in pushing large masses of low level farm wage workers, middle level aspirants of social mobility to take up more paying modern jobs towards cities, which had their own pull factors (Bardhan 1977) [3]. Zones or regions such as the Hyderabad Karnataka area in Karnataka were deprived (for a long time) of irrigation facilities, which play a major role in creating on-farm wage work for women also. The study by Scarlet Epstein in Mandya district in the 1950s and again in the 1970s (1998) has shown how irrigation facilities create more employment opportunities. Although such districts are benefitted by some of the river projects like the KRS Dam across river Cauvery, Tungabhadra, and Upper Krishna (across rivers Tungabhadra and Krishna) Project, not all villages are deriving benefits of irrigation. With highest concentration of Dalit and ST families in them, the 7 districts of the HK region have high number of landless, marginal land-owning and vulnerable people in its villages.

Lingam (1998) [14] has shown how, besides marriage practices according to patrilocal and exogamy systems, women moved out of their native village homes to husband's homes. But the migration of males to urban areas used to land them also in cities and towns. However, the studies by her and others have found a steady increase of female migration in the last 3-4 decades, from villages to secure work in the urban areas. This proves the fact that economic reasons are primary ones causing such increased flow of women as migrants to cities for work. And this shift 'spatially' is a greater movement over long-distance geographical space because of the possibility of obtaining work with high wages.

Secondly, the process of young men migrating after marriage from villages towards cities is landing their wives too in the migration process. Various social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors are responsible for this increase. There is a definite shift from marriage related migration to one induced by economic demands on women's labour. A few micro-level studies have proved this, such as by Sardamoni (1995) have highlighted the importance of transportation and communication in long distance migration by both men and women.

Another notable point here is how landlessness also acts as a major socio-economic constraint to stay back in the same native place, without resorting to migration. Land is a great economic asset providing economic security, and social status to the households, besides being a permanent source of income for sustenance. Land is considered as one of the major economic assets of a household as it provides economic security to people, apart from being a permanent source of income. But during distress situations like drought or family crisis, the same (land) is sold and land-poor households typically rely on the sale of their labour for farm and non-farm activities. Control over cultivable land is critical to livelihood security and thus provides a choice whether to migrate or not. The evidence to date suggests that those with limited access to land and other assets are more likely to migrate.

Critical Reflections

Now, sociologists are wondering as to why migration despite the above and many other initiatives is continuing to attract the poor? The Census 2011, National Family Health Surveys, and several independent sociological and social science research have shown the ever-increasing size and heterogeneity of migrant population, not only in our state,

but it is true of all the states of India. With in the state of Karnataka, migration of labour force seeking blue collar work in the sectors of construction, road work and other casual labour forms is high from what are known as the districts of Kalyana (formerly Hyderabad Karnataka-HK) Karnataka. This speaks of another round of attention to be duly given to the additional attention that the region has received since 1956 when it was merged in to the state of Mysore (as called then). In the early part of the present century (2002) this region was highlighted for its continued backwardness in the Report of Redressal of Regional Inequalities in Karnataka (popularly called as the Dr. D M Nanjundappa Report). Special focus was given in the subsequent plans and policies to reduce poverty and distress migration, to increase standard of living, literacy, work participation rate and asset formation like land and house; sanitation, self-employment etc. Furthermore, in the year 2012, the 98th constitutional amendment Act inserted Article 371-J to provide special provisions to the HK region, by the President of India. This placed the responsibility of establishing a separate board for the HK area, enhanced fund allocation, reserve seats in educational institutions for students hailing from these districts and in government service for people.

There are at present 7 districts in the HK region[1]. Although there is a dearth of studies on them regarding the issue of out migration, evaluation studies, doctoral theses and research projects by university scholars have hypothesized that their poverty situation is the major factor. It is not just income or economic poverty but socio-cultural – in the form of continued existence of social evils like Devadasi practice, child marriages, untouchability and oppression of Dalits, landlessness due to social exclusion, low status of women, large family size and exploitation from the dominant castes.

There are two aspects to their presence: one is that poor and Dalit women from this region are not new to either migration for work, nor specifically to take up construction labour. They have been a part of streams of migrations from the north Karnataka region right from the time of independence, towards the south to the coffee plantations of Kodagu, Hassan, Chikmagalur and Dakshina Kannada; as well as to Bengaluru city to earn a living along with family males to work as their assistants in building construction and road work.

The second aspect is that women have been working with in the specific gendered roles of division of work like assistants supplying raw materials on the construction site, fetching water and cooking for the males. There is no taking over of men's work or specialisation.

Source of data for the paper

The present paper draws its sociological data and perspectives largely from a study is set in Bengaluru city, the capital of the state of Karnataka, and more than that the Silicon Valley, IT hub and technological capital, known internationally. It is largely based on existing literature or secondary source information like government reports, census, research papers, journal articles and a few books on related issues. There is a dearth of sociological works in Karnataka exactly on women in labour migration. The primary data for the project is drawn from our study of construction workers from HK area working in Bengaluru city, a few preliminary ideas obtained through discussions with a few respondents, which are used to prepare some arguments in the paper.

Out of its wards and zones, 4 wards representing the four directions of North and South; East and West were considered suitable to draw a sample of 228 construction workers. There are an estimated 3165496 migrant construction workers in the whole state of whom 25 per cent are working in Bengaluru city (6,25000). Of these 625000, 40 per cent hail from the different districts of HK area. Raichur (24%) and Yadgiri (22%) are the districts with the highest numbers of migrant construction workers followed by other districts (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres-SPARC).

Preliminary Findings on Women's Migration from the HK Region

The study has brought out that economic compulsions are pushing women from the rural areas to seek wage work, along with husbands and sons to the cities. Most of our respondents are found to be hailing from poorer sections of society, and with low level of education. Preliminary observations have told us that such mobility is caused not by an aspiration for social mobility but by a compulsion to survive. More than 50 per cent of our respondents are primary educated or illiterates. Several structural changes in villages of Karnataka like greater mechanization of farming, deforestation, privatization of common property resources, etc., is causing loss of wage employment. When men have no work, they are turning to take on the jobs that women used to engage in such as transplantation, weeding, irrigation, harvesting, etc. But their preferred choice is to move to cities than facing starvation back home. Women, being illiterate and unskilled are ready to take up any type of job to add to HH income. This is true of other countries too as in Sri Lanka pointed out by a a study by Kottegoda (2006) [13] where similar factors of poverty and lack of employment opportunities for males has pushed them out of villages and it apples to women also. Several village studies in India have also concluded similarly (Seddon *et al.* 2001; Adhikari 1996) [22, 1].

Role of Social Networks

Social networks provide the key for facilitating female migration as argued by few scholars like Hann (2006). The chain migration among relatives, neighbours and fellow villagers is seen by women as a supportive factor in the unknown or new place of destination, the city. Another study has presented its findings that domestic maids in Delhi who were migrants from Tamil Nadu found the socio-cultural homogeneity among them useful for security in the place of work (houses of people whom they serve) and in the slums (Kasturi 1990) [12]. Most of them were from low and Dalit castes. In large numbers, domestic workers are SCs by caste (80.7%) and their number is steadily on the rise as shown by data from the NSS.

Ambition for Improvement of Economic Condition and Children's Education

Women migrants in the study area have placed more importance on two factors that have motivated them to migrate. One is to contribute to HH income by assisting males in their own work – may be in house construction or

[1] Ballari, Bidar, Kalburgi, Koppal, Raichur, Vijayanagar and Yadagiri

road work. This is besides some of them working as domestic maids. They have expressed that they have accompanied husbands to ensure home food for them for reasons of economy (as hotel food is very costly) and health (outside food always causes ill health besides being costly). Absence of schools of good quality, amenities for proper health services and basic needs are also mentioned as supporting factors for their migration. Majority of women migrate out of villages during the slack seasons when there is no local employment – the summer months.

From the frying pan to the oven?

The paper is labelled with a quip '*from the frying pan to the oven'* for a specific reason: the women migrants were found toiling hard to make a living for themselves and their families left behind in their villages and tandas (hamlets). They are largely from Raichur and Yadgiri districts and used to hard labour, low wages, and seasonal unemployment. Even in the place of destination, Bengaluru city, they were found residing in thatched huts or mud houses, with no sanitation facilities. The only luxury was availability of electricity in the houses and bore well tap water as a public facility. Their children were not able to access middle and higher secondary education due to poverty at home on the one hand which made them to work as child labourers, but also because not every village had such high schools. The local grama panchayats with members who were women, Dalit, and low caste people, did little to alleviate their household poverty.

Migration towards the metropolitan Bengaluru city by the males necessitated many construction labourer families to also decide that the wives will accompany the husband. The hope was for some wage labour for women. More than anything else, their expectation was for obtaining good schooling, for the children. In many cases, the women had to come with breast-feeding child or a daughter of the age of attaining maturity. Thus, there were several cultural and biological reasons for bringing the wife and children to the city by the migrant men getting into any risky situations in the new place.

The reality as experienced by the new migrants and relatively older ones varies. For the latter who have been able to survive the harsh realities of urban, cosmopolitan city, after 6-8 years of stay, the women feel slightly comfortable at least to obtain work as house maids or others. But for the new migrants, it is more problematic to adjust to the change. Personal insecurities, alcoholism by the husband, harassment and domestic violence has become part of the lives of some of them. Unlike in the village, their joint family, kin, or caste community is absent here to offer support or put the men to order. Social networks with neighbours are temporary as frequent shift in residence is guaranteed for a construction labourer who moves from one work site to another in far ends of the city. They get into areas for work, where they may not have fellow workers from their region. Now-a-days, people from all over, particularly the north and North-East of India are in large numbers in this industry – construction of multi-storeyed buildings and apartments, residential complexes; and laying roads, building metro lines etc.

Thus, some of the respondents have felt that they have come to experience greater insecurity and violence than back in the villages as if they have been moved from the frying pan to the oven!

Conclusions

Modern times or the new millennium is a witness to many significant changes in the work force, especially in the urban areas. Besides its trends and patterns, it has clearly led to an increase in women's work force in cities who are migrants. The paper prompts sociologists to think about the gender roles not only in rural homes, but also among migrants to urban areas. Beginning with the process of decision-making to migrate, the economic activities that these migrant women undertake in the place of destination (the city), their economic and familial contributions, goals, and aspirations in the form of making their children access good education and improved living with safe drinking water, exposure to urban culture and future job opportunities – all these have made women's migration to cities along with one's husband, an inevitable part of migration studies by sociologists. Governmental attention is needed to provide safety and security to these women through policies and programmes, proper infrastructure like workers' sheds or dwelling houses with basic amenities. Women's migration should not be viewed or studied only from the economic perspective, although there are economic variables such as female work participation rate, unemployment, irrigation, etc., influencing female migration rate in the expected direction, like in the case of males. This contradicts earlier views on female migration which suggested that female migration is not economic-oriented. The macro level changes occurring in society has a significant impact on it female migration. Literature has come out with findings suggesting that there is a rise in gender-specific labour demand in urban areas.

This paper emphasises upon the sociological outcome that there are many non-economic factors controlling and directing it. Data from NSS has also suggested that there are a significant number of women migrants accompanying husbands as labourers, likely to take up tasks which are feminine in gender roles-domestic maids, *Ayahs*, assisting husband in his work, or simply involved in cooking and child care. Nevertheless, the study has shed light on the fact that women migrate to urban areas along with family-males. Thus, women's migration is closely connected with male migration, at least in the construction labour sector in Bengaluru city. But the harsh realities of city life with poor housing and basic amenities, abuse, poverty etc have had a unpleasant impact on many of them, in the sense of making hem dependent far more on the men.

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