

CHAPTER-06

UNVEILING THE SILENT SUFFERING: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have been extensive, particularly affecting marginalized groups such as female migrant workers in India. These women represent a sizable segment of the country's workforce, mainly involved in informal industries such as household chores, building construction, and farming. However, the pandemic-induced lockdowns and economic downturn disrupted their livelihoods, plunging many into unemployment, income loss, and a dearth of social protection measures. This exacerbated their financial insecurities and susceptibility to exploitation. Exacerbated by the closure of borders and limitations on movement, many women were left stranded in urban areas they were unfamiliar with, without sufficient access to healthcare and sanitation facilities, heightening their susceptibility to health hazards such as COVID-19. Moreover, disrupted childcare and elderly care services added to their burdens, amplifying mental and emotional stress. The pandemic worsened existing gender gaps, revealing increased discrimination, violence, and exploitation against women in workplaces and homes. Addressing these challenges necessitates comprehensive policy interventions that safeguard their rights, ensure access to social protections, healthcare services, and economic opportunities. Providing specialized assistance measures and inclusive policies is crucial for boosting the socio-economic stability and resilience of female migrant workers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively lessening its long-lasting effects.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Migrant Labour, Discrimination, Social Protections, Healthcare Services.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Migrant workers are an asset to every country where they bring their labour. Let us give them the dignity, they deserve as human beings and the respect they deserve as workers”

Juan Somavia, Director General of ILO

This chapter seeks to methodically examine the diverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on female migrant workers in India. The study delves into the challenges faced by this vulnerable demographic, encompassing economic, health, and social dimensions. This paper seeks to illuminate the unique challenges faced by female migrant workers amidst the pandemic by analyzing current research, administering surveys, and incorporating qualitative interviews. The goal is to offer valuable insights to policymakers and stakeholders, enabling them to develop tailored interventions. Migration of labour is a human phenomenon. Employees are free to relocate as they seek for new employment opportunities. It has been observed by humanity for aeons. Humans have an innate inclination to adjust to novel and relatively comfortable

environments. India is on the brink of a significant transformation, where two pivotal historical occurrences will unfold concurrently in the coming decades: the migrations and demographic shifts. This transformation resembles a vast social revolution, poised to redefine interpersonal relationships to a degree where it will swiftly influence all societal interactions, individuals, and communities. It will reshape the organization of social and economic ties and fundamentally transform perceptions of identity, community, and society. This paradigm shift will also question established ideas regarding growth and well-being, citizenship and belonging, as well as the foundations for accessing economic and social opportunities.

The primary drivers of this 'step change' will be the simultaneous forces of economic expansion, spearheaded by a youthful demographic and increased global integration, fuelled by globalization. This integration involves interconnected markets for both goods and capital, reduced obstacles to international trade and investment, and facilitated migration. With notable advancements in transportation and communication significantly reducing costs, and the rise of transnational networks fostering unprecedented connectivity, the world will become more interconnected while societies become more diverse than ever. However, globalization brings with it its own complexities. While it facilitates the migration of highly skilled individuals, it also displaces unskilled workers in traditional economies, highlighting its dual nature (Li, S. Peter. 2008).

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The significance of COVID-19's effects on female migrant workers in India is pivotal in delineating the research's extent and intent. These effects steer the research trajectory and contribute to attaining a methodical and all-encompassing grasp of the topic. Below are suggested aims for your investigation:

- Evaluate the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 outbreak on female migrant workers in India, encompassing employment reduction, wage gaps, and hurdles encountered within the informal economy. Additionally, scrutinize the elements that amplify their economic fragility.
- Examine the health challenges faced by women migrant workers during the pandemic, investigating the accessibility and quality of healthcare services, reproductive health concerns, and mental health implications.
- Examine the societal ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis on female migrant workers, encompassing occurrences of gender-related violence, disturbances in

social connections and communal assistance frameworks, and obstacles encountered by migrant children in their educational pursuits.

- Understand the coping instruments and flexibility strategies employed by women migrant workers, identifying community-based support systems and adaptive strategies to navigate challenges effectively.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of both governmental and non-governmental efforts in addressing the requirements of female migrant workers. Analyse how current policies respond to gender-specific issues, identify any implementation gaps, and propose policy adjustments to alleviate the effects of potential future crises on this particular group.

These goals are designed to provide a comprehensive comprehension of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected female migrant workers in India, offering valuable perspectives for policymakers, researchers, and organizations dedicated to improving the well-being of this at-risk group.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by female migrant workers in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaps in existing research include the necessity for more nuanced examinations of coping mechanisms, community support systems, and the effectiveness of governmental and non-governmental initiatives in mitigating the impact on this vulnerable group. Subsequent sections of this research paper will delve into these aspects to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. The COVID-19 crisis has not just presented significant health dangers worldwide; it has also exposed the vulnerabilities of certain demographic segments, notably women migrant labourers in India, who have been particularly affected. This review of literature seeks to consolidate current research, illuminating the various dimensions of the pandemic's effects on this susceptible population.

A comprehensive examination of how COVID-19 has affected female migrant workers in India involves thoroughly exploring diverse sources to provide comprehensive insight into the topic. Below is a literature review outlining the main discoveries from available literature:

- **Women Migrant Workers in India:** Numerous research studies underscore the distinct hurdles encountered by female migrant workers in India, often relegated to low-paying, informal work. Their precarious employment situations and scant

access to social safety nets intensify their vulnerability during crises (Srivastava, 2019; Kabeer, 2019).

- **Impact of Previous Crises on Migrant Workers:** Past economic downturns, like the 2008 financial crisis, have starkly revealed the susceptibility of migrant workers to economic upheavals, with women bearing the brunt through job losses and exacerbated hardships, underscoring the imperative for targeted crisis interventions (ILO, 2011; Deshingkar et al., 2012).
- **Gender Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic:** Scholarly investigations highlight the gendered ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately impacting women across multiple spheres. Lockdown measures, economic disruptions, and healthcare obstacles have intersected with existing gender disparities, magnifying the plight of female migrant workers (Chakraborty et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020).
- **Economic Impact on Women Migrant Workers:** Studies shed light on the profound economic fallout of the pandemic on women migrant workers, including job losses, income disparities, and challenges accessing social safety nets, emphasizing the urgency for gender-sensitive economic policies (Kundu & Sarangi, 2020; Bhalla et al., 2021).
- **Health Challenges:** The pandemic has exacerbated concerns about limited healthcare access, particularly for women migrant workers, leading to worsened reproductive and mental health issues due to barriers in accessing healthcare services (Raj et al., 2020; George et al., 2021).
- **Social Impact:** Incidents of gender-based violence against female migrant workers underscore the heightened risks in the absence of adequate social support systems. Disruptions in social networks and obstacles in educating migrant children further compound the social ramifications (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Anitha et al., 2020).

4. ECONOMIC IMPACT ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant economic effect on female migrant workers in India, deeply affecting their income, jobs, and overall financial stability.

The following key points provide an overview of the economic challenges faced by women migrant workers during the pandemic:

i. Job Loss and Income Disparities

- **Widespread Job Losses:** The pandemic triggered mass job losses across sectors, with women migrant workers disproportionately affected. Many worked in informal and low-skilled jobs, making them more susceptible to layoffs during economic downturns (Desmond et al., 2020).
- **Income Disparities:** Women frequently receive lower pay than men for comparable tasks, a gap that was exacerbated by the pandemic. The economic consequences of the crisis hit women harder, leading to decreased earnings and heightened financial instability (International Labour Organization, 2020).

ii. Informal Sector Vulnerability

- **Predominance in Informal Economy:** Dominance in the Informal Economy: A considerable portion of female migrant workers in India find employment in the informal sector, characterized by a lack of job security and social safety nets. Their informal work arrangements left them particularly vulnerable to economic downturns during periods of lockdowns and restrictions.
- **Limited Social Protection:** Insufficient Social Safeguards: The absence of adequate social protection mechanisms, including unemployment benefits and healthcare coverage, heightened the economic insecurity faced by women migrant workers. The absence of a safety net exacerbated their financial strain during times of crisis (World Bank, 2020).

iii. Access to Social Protection Measures

- **Challenges in Access:** Women migrant workers faced difficulties in accessing government relief measures and financial aid. Barriers such as documentation requirements, language barriers, and lack of awareness hindered their ability to benefit from support programs (Choudhari & Reddy, 2021).
- **Gender-Insensitive Policies:** Existing social protection policies often did not consider the sole needs and circumstances of women migrant workers.

Gender-insensitive policies failed to address the exact economic challenges faced by this group during the epidemic (Narayanan et al., 2021).

iv. Debt and Financial Stress

- **Increased Indebtedness:** To cope with economic hardships, some women migrant workers resorted to taking loans at high interest rates, leading to increased indebtedness. This further compounded their financial stress and limited their ability to recover from the economic downturn (Sarangi, 2020).
- **Impact on Livelihoods:** Impact on Livelihoods: The repercussions on income extended beyond mere earnings loss. Female migrants encountered difficulties in maintaining their means of living, with economic disturbances impacting the demand for their labour, notably in fields such as domestic service and construction (Kundu & Sarangi, 2020).

The economic repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis on female migrant workers in India have been profound, characterized by unemployment, income disparagement, and insufficient access to social safety nets. Tackling these issues necessitates policies sensitive to gender dynamics, recognizing and addressing the distinctive challenges faced by women involved in migrant work, thus safeguarding their economic stability amidst future emergencies.

5. SOCIAL IMPACT ON WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

The repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis on female migrant workers in India stretch further than just economic consequences, impacting multiple facets of their social welfare. Here are essential insights shedding light on the social hurdles confronted by women migrant workers amidst the pandemic:

Gender-Based Violence

- **Heightened Vulnerability:** Women migrant workers faced an increased risk of gender-based violence during the pandemic. The combination of economic stress, cramped living conditions, and limited access to support services contributed to their heightened vulnerability (George et al., 2021).
- **Barriers to Reporting:** Barriers such as fear of retaliation, lack of awareness about available support services, and social stigma often deterred women from reporting incidents of violence. This silence further perpetuated the cycle of abuse (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Disruption of Social Networks

- **Isolation and Loneliness:** Lockdown measures and limitations on movement have caused disruptions in the social connections of female migrant workers. Being away from their families and friends, coupled with the lack of community assistance, intensified their sense of isolation and loneliness (Srivastava, et, al., 2020).
- **Impact on Mental Health:** The disruption of social connections had mental health implications, contributing to stress, anxiety, and depression among women migrant workers. The lack of a support system exacerbated the challenges they faced (Choudhari & Reddy, 2021).

Educational Challenges for Migrant Children:

- **Education Disruption:** The closure of schools and educational facilities caused upheaval in the education of migrant children as many women workers brought their kids along. Limited access to online education and inadequate infrastructure compounded the challenges, impeding the educational progress of these children (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Child Labour Concerns:** Child Labour Worries: Economic difficulties and school closures heightened worries about a surge in child labour within migrant households. Often, children, particularly girls, were compelled to work to support the family financially (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Access to Healthcare

- **Limited Healthcare Access:** Women migrant workers often faced barriers to accessing healthcare services. Lack of awareness, language barriers, and concerns about legal repercussions for undocumented migrants restricted their ability to seek medical assistance when needed (Raj et al., 2020).
- **Reproductive Health Concerns:** Disruptions in healthcare services had implications for reproductive health, including limited access to maternal care and family planning services. These challenges were compounded by pre-existing gender disparities in healthcare (George et al., 2021).

Community Support Systems:

- **Impact on Informal Support:** Impact on Informal Support: The erosion of community support structures, particularly within informal settlements and urban areas, has reduced the availability of informal support networks. This has

led to heightened isolation among women migrant workers during times of crisis (Srivastava, 2020).

- **Resilience and Coping Mechanisms:** Resilience and Coping Strategies: Despite obstacles, certain women migrant workers have demonstrated resilience through community-driven support mechanisms. Mutual assistance, informal connections, and community-driven endeavours have played pivotal roles in navigating the social ramifications of the pandemic (McIntyre Miller, W., & Atwi, R. 2023).

The social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers in India are evident in heightened susceptibility to gender-based violence, disruptions in social connections, and educational hurdles for migrant children, limited healthcare access, and shifts in community support systems. Addressing these social dimensions is crucial for safeguarding the well-being and resilience of women migrant workers in the aftermath of the pandemic.

6. POLICY RESPONSES AND GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR ADDRESSING THE MIGRANT WORKERS

The Indian government's approach to addressing the difficulties encountered by migrant workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been diverse, involving several initiatives targeting the economic, social, and health repercussions. Nonetheless, there are discernible deficiencies and constraints in how these policies are put into practice. Below is an examination of government efforts alongside the evident gaps.

Government Initiatives

- **One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC):** The One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) initiative aims to facilitate migrant workers' access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) across different states. This scheme enables them to procure subsidized food grains regardless of their location. By eliminating the barriers faced by migrant workers in accessing food entitlements outside their home states, ONORC addresses a persistent challenge in ensuring their food security.
- **Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self-Reliant India Campaign):** The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, or Self-Reliant India Campaign, unveiled a series of initiatives aimed at bolstering the economy, including collateral-free loans for businesses, credit support, and liquidity infusion. Despite its comprehensive economic implications, the campaign's immediate effects on the informal and migrant

labour sectors, which often employ a significant number of women workers, were somewhat constrained.

- **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY):** The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) was introduced with the objective of offering financial aid and necessary provisions to marginalized groups, particularly migrant workers. Central to this initiative were direct cash transfers and the distribution of essential food items. While the program succeeded in delivering prompt assistance, it encountered difficulties in both identifying and reaching all deserving recipients. Despite its positive impact in alleviating some of the economic burdens faced by migrant workers, the scheme faced hurdles in ensuring comprehensive coverage.
- **Shramik Special Trains:** Amidst the lockdown, the Shramik Special Trains initiative was launched to aid the repatriation of stranded migrant workers to their respective home states. This endeavour aimed to mitigate the hardships faced by these workers and facilitate their reunion with their families. Despite its noble intentions, the initiative encountered initial hurdles, including confusion and coordination challenges, sparking doubts about its efficacy in execution. Nevertheless, it played a crucial role in addressing the pressing need to transport stranded individuals back to their hometowns, offering them a semblance of relief during uncertain times.

Gaps and Limitations

- **Lack of Data and Identification:** An obstacle encountered in addressing the requirements of migrant workers revolves around the absence of extensive data and precise identification. The substantial portion of the workforce, particularly those engaged in informal sectors, lacks proper documentation, rendering them elusive targets for tailored assistance efforts. This dearth of comprehensive data complicates the task of effectively catering to their needs.
- **Insufficient Financial Support:** The issue of insufficient financial support presents a significant challenge. Despite the introduction of several financial relief initiatives, doubts linger regarding the adequacy of the assistance, particularly for individuals operating within the informal sector. Numerous workers have expressed concerns, noting that the financial aid offered falls short of meeting their fundamental requirements.
- **Insufficient Healthcare Assistance:** The provision of healthcare services posed a significant obstacle for migrant workers, highlighted particularly during the

pandemic. The healthcare system's deficiencies became apparent, with migrants encountering difficulties in accessing medical aid due to various factors such as language barriers, lack of proper documentation, and limited awareness.

- **Limited Focus on Gender-Specific Issues:** Some initiatives have failed to adequately address the unique challenges confronted by women migrant workers, such as the heightened risk of gender-based violence and reproductive health issues. This insufficient focus on gender-specific concerns underscores the necessity for implementing policies and interventions that are sensitive to gender dynamics and specifically tailored to address the needs of women in migration.
- **Delayed and Inconsistent Implementation:** A significant obstacle encountered was the delayed and inconsistent execution of initiatives. Challenges emerged notably in various areas such as the registration procedures for special trains, the allocation of financial assistance, and the distribution of food supplies. These instances underscored the difficulties in ensuring prompt and consistent implementation of policies across the board.
- **Lack of Social Support Systems:** The failure to adequately address the breakdown of community support networks during the pandemic emerges as a significant challenge. Relief efforts primarily centered on economic aid, neglecting the vital role of informal community structures in assisting migrant workers. While governmental interventions have provided some relief, bridging the gaps in execution and adopting a more inclusive approach remains paramount. Particularly, recognizing and addressing the distinct challenges encountered by female migrant workers is imperative for safeguarding their well-being and resilience. Key inadequacies in the government response encompass the absence of comprehensive data on migrant workers, inadequate financial aid, particularly for those in the informal sector, insufficient healthcare support, with limited attention to gender-specific issues, as well as delays and inconsistencies in the implementation of initiatives. These shortcomings underscore the pressing need for a more holistic and nuanced approach to ensure the welfare of this vulnerable population.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A thorough examination of gender-specific issues among migrant women workers is imperative to comprehend and address the unique hurdles they encounter, such as gender-based violence, reproductive health concerns, and the added burden of childcare responsibilities during crises. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to

assess the sustained economic resilience of these women, evaluating the efficacy of financial relief measures and sustainable livelihood options over time.

Another crucial aspect is the assessment of healthcare access barriers faced by women migrant workers, with a focus on enhancing awareness, streamlining documentation processes, and improving healthcare service responsiveness. Additionally, investigating the role of community support systems and effective coping mechanisms can provide valuable insights into mitigating the social impacts on migrant women workers.

Evaluation of government policies, both existing and prospective, is essential to gauge their adequacy in meeting the specific needs of women migrant workers. Recommendations stemming from rigorous policy evaluations can pave the way for necessary improvements. Moreover, an intersectional analysis is indispensable, considering how factors like class, caste, and ethnicity intersect with gender to shape the experiences of migrant women workers during crises.

Understanding the long-term repercussions of educational disruptions on migrant children is paramount for their future opportunities and well-being. This entails exploring potential implications and devising strategies to mitigate adverse effects. Furthermore, examining the effectiveness of interventions by NGOs and civil society in supporting women migrant workers can identify best practices and areas requiring enhancement.

Engaging in policy advocacy for gender-responsive measures is crucial to ensure that government initiatives adequately cater to the specific needs of women in migrant labor. This involves active participation in the development and implementation of policies aimed at uplifting and empowering migrant women workers. Additionally, conducting comparative studies with other countries facing similar challenges can offer insights into promising practices and innovative solutions applicable within the Indian context. By addressing these research gaps and implications, future studies can contribute significantly to a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by women migrant workers in India. Moreover, evidence-based strategies and interventions can be updated and refined to effectively uplift and empower these marginalized segments of society.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the profound effects of COVID-19 on women migrant workers in India underscore the urgent necessity for targeted interventions and policy reforms. The chapter illuminates the exacerbated vulnerabilities faced by this demographic, spanning

economic, health, and social spheres. As we navigate recovery, it is imperative to prioritize gender-responsive policies and empowerment initiatives that centre the voices of these marginalized women. By doing so, we can pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive post-pandemic society, ensuring that no one is left behind in the journey towards resilience and prosperity.

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