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Invisible Labour and Compounded Vulnerability: A Study of Migrant Women During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed deeply entrenched gendered vulnerabilities within India's internal migration system, particularly among migrant domestic workers. As frontline contributors to urban households, these women – often from marginalized castes and lower economic background – faced sudden job losses, wage denial, and exclusion from state-sponsored relief measures. Despite their critical role in sustaining urban care economies, they were among the first to be dismissed under social distancing norms, perceived as potential carriers of infection due to their class and residential background (often slums or informal settlements.

Keywords: Migration, Domestic workers, Pandemic, Gender vulnerabilities

Introduction

Internal migration is a pervasive phenomenon, involving a large portion of the population across the country. According to Census 2011, 37.4 per cent of the total population was engaged in internal migration, including 312.7 million female migrants and 140.9 million male migrants—nearly double the figures reported in the 1971 Census (Rajan, 2020). Migration patterns reveal various gendered reasons, differing significantly for men and women. If we examine these reasons separately, the 1981 Census clearly indicates marriage as the predominant cause of migration for women, while employment and work opportunities have consistently been cited as the primary reasons for male migration. Due to the tradition of village exogamy and the custom of women moving to their husband's residence, women have historically dominated short-distance migration. However, women's mobility for economic purposes has gradually increased, and they are increasingly visible as principal earners (Bose, 1974). Census 2001 reported that nearly 59 per cent of migrant women cited marriage as their primary reason for migration. By 2011, this figure had declined to 52 per cent, indicating a shift as more women began reporting economic and other factors as reasons for their migration (Mahapatro, 2020; Datta, 2020). This shift highlights the growing economic role of women in India's migration landscape. Despite these developments, agencies such as the Census and the NSS still struggle to accurately account for the number and contributions of female migrants, largely due to stereotypical gender norms. As a result, women's migration is often categorized as either 'associational' or 'labour' migration. In the former, women are perceived primarily as caregivers, while in the latter, they are contributors to household income.

Nevertheless, women are invariably connected to the migration process, whether they move themselves or remain at the place of origin. Women who stay behind often manage the household and provide crucial support to male migrants by handling domestic affairs. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it is common for male migrants to leave their wives at the ancestral village for security reasons (Jetly 1987). Studies reveal that these left-behind women take on both economic and domestic responsibilities, though their contributions remain largely unrecognized due to the restrictive definitions used in migration data.

The contributions of women to migration are frequently obscured by socio-cultural ideologies that define their roles narrowly. For instance, their unpaid caregiving is often excluded from formal definitions of work. Krishnaraj, M. (1990) questioned the Census methodology, arguing that women who migrate with their husbands often contribute economically, yet their labor remains invisible. Therefore, enumerators should move beyond merely identifying reasons for migration and instead investigate whether women are engaged in economic activities. This is especially relevant for Dalit women, who often work in agriculture both before and after marriage, continuing their labor at their in-laws' homes (Shanthi, 2006).

Patriarchal biases within migration agencies further exacerbate the vulnerability of women. Left-behind women are often not recognized as migrants, and those who do migrate are frequently labeled as 'associational' migrants, diminishing their agency. Thus, migration is a multilayered process wherein women face numerous challenges stemming from socio-cultural structures. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified these vulnerabilities, stripping women of their livelihoods, spaces, and aspirations. This paper attempts to explore the vulnerabilities faced by migrant women during the lockdown and pandemic period.

Types of Female Migration

Due to their perceived docile and passive characteristics, women have consistently been in demand in the labor market, leading to both the feminization of labor and the feminization of migration. Migration studies have identified various types of female migration: Autonomous Migration: This category includes women, particularly from upper and middle-class backgrounds, who migrate independently to pursue higher education or better job opportunities, aiming to improve their social status and prospects in the marriage market. Relay Migration: In this form, families who possess some land in the village send their daughters to urban areas under the supervision of a mistress or employer, often to work as domestic laborers. This form of migration reflects intergenerational strategies of survival and income generation. Associational Migration: This occurs when a woman joins her husband at the destination, often with the hope of finding suitable employment or supporting the household. Although seen as an extension of spousal dependency, women in this category also contribute significantly to household income and stability. Family Migration: In this case, husbands bring their wives to the destination to take care of the household, especially domestic chores. In the Indian socio-cultural context, men are traditionally seen as responsible for external, income-generating work, while women are assigned household responsibilities. Labourer Migration: Women who lack land or other assets in their village migrate primarily for employment. Although they often move with their families, employment remains the main concern. This type of migration highlights the tension between patriarchal ideology and economic necessity: while women's contributions challenge male dominance, marriage provides a framework of interdependence that sustains

patriarchal structures. This group is distinct in migrating as family units, yet employment is the primary motive for both men and women. Left-Behind Women: These are women who remain in the village while male members migrate. Although this is an indirect form of migration, it plays a crucial role in sustaining the process. Left-behind women bear dual responsibilities—managing domestic chores and agricultural work—thus facilitating male migration by maintaining the home base.

The present study focuses on two broad categories of migrant women: associational migrants and labourer migrant women, examining how these groups were affected during the pandemic.

Notes on Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design. Due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, content analysis has been selected as the primary method of data collection and analysis. Content analysis provides a systematic, qualitative description of the manifest content of communication and is particularly suitable in the absence of primary field data. It allows researchers to derive unbiased and accurate insights from existing material.

To gather data, the study analysed both English and Hindi newspapers, as well as lectures, webinars conducted by academic institutions, and reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations. The primary English newspapers selected include *The Hindu*, *Times of India*, and *Hindustan Times* to understand the nationwide impact of the pandemic. In addition, online independent media platforms such as *The Wire*, *The Print*, and *Newsclick* were included, as they report ground-level realities through field-based surveys. Hindi newspapers were also examined to understand regional variations, particularly in areas where migrant populations were disproportionately affected. Both English and Hindi media sources were chosen to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of migrant issues. Three key criteria were used to select newspaper content. First is the relationship between the headline and the actual news content, second is the positioning of the news item within the newspaper, and third is the readership and credibility of the publication. This study aims to explore the condition of migrant women during the lockdown and pandemic periods, as they emerged among the most vulnerable populations.

A. Impact of Covid-19 on Associational Migrant Women

The Covid-19 outbreak affected people across different caste, class, gender, and other socio-structural lines. In the case of migrant women, the impact varied depending on their stream of migration. Associational migration, in particular, is often tied more to women's aspirations for emancipation from patriarchal clutches than to direct employment opportunities. However, the pandemic dashed these aspirations, forcing many women to return to the same patriarchal structures they were attempting to escape. The impact of the pandemic on associational migrant women can be observed in three major forms:

Increasing Workload

The closure of schools and offices during the lockdown significantly increased the burden of unpaid care work, which traditionally falls on women and girls. Even under normal circumstances, women perform three times more unpaid work than men. During lockdown,

this imbalance was exacerbated. A survey by *Upceed Consulting Services* (UCS)[1], a Bengaluru-based company, found that 70% of employees were working from home, and 95% reported increased workloads, even on weekends. This trend disproportionately affected women due to their role as caregivers. This raises critical questions: When the workplace shifts into the home, does it impact men and women equally? What are the consequences of the overlapping of paid and unpaid labor, particularly when only paid employment is officially recognized as "work"? Women's activities such as cooking, cleaning, child care, and household maintenance remain largely invisible and unacknowledged. As a result, women face stress from a double burden—if they focus on their personal lives, their professional roles suffer, and vice versa. Earlier, some of these tasks were split between before and after work hours or were supported by domestic workers. However, during the lockdown, with all family members at home and physical distancing norms in place, domestic help was unavailable—leaving women with full responsibility.

Domestic Violence

Multiple studies indicate that gender-based violence increased during the lockdown, a trend not unique to India. Research has shown that when families are confined together for extended periods, the risk of violence—especially domestic violence—rises (Booth, 2017; Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005). The Covid-19 crisis led to significant job and income losses, and scholars such as Peprah and Koomson (2017) have linked low income with increased domestic violence. Countries including Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom reported spikes in domestic violence cases, alongside increased demand for emergency shelters. In India, Rekha Sharma, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW), reported a significant increase in cases of domestic and sexual violence during the initial phase of the lockdown, often perpetrated by intimate partners[2]. Sharma and Borah (2020) noted that the social and economic crises brought on by the pandemic escalated violence against women. This period thus significantly compromised women's rights and dignity.[3]

Women Struggling on the Road

Although several state governments initiated special train services for migrants during the Covid-19 lockdown, many were unable to access these facilities. As a result, thousands were forced to undertake long and arduous journeys on foot—often with children in tow. One widely circulated image captured the gravity of the situation: a woman pulling a suitcase with her child sleeping atop it, symbolizing the dual burden of physical hardship and caregiving.

In such crises, the role of women becomes particularly crucial, as children rely heavily on their mothers for care, comfort, and emotional support. A widely reported incident in Uttar

[1] https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/workplace/work-from-home-women-men-challenges-digital-sexual-harassment-6505583/ access on 12.10.2020.

[2] https://thewire.in/women/violence-against-women-social-crisis access on 12.10.2020.

[3] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-witnesses-steep-rise-in-crime-against-women-amidcoronavirus-lockdown-587-complaints-received-ncw/article31369261.ece access on 12.10.020

Pradesh highlighted the extent of this suffering—where a pregnant woman gave birth on the roadside under a tree and then continued to walk over 500 kilometres on foot. A similar case was reported in Madhya Pradesh[4]. Walking such long distances was especially challenging for women, not only due to their caregiving responsibilities but also because many were managing menstruation without access to basic sanitary facilities. Another heartbreaking narrative featured a mother and her six-year-old daughter, both part of a group migrating from Eastern Uttar Pradesh to Jaunpur, who tragically lost their lives in a road accident. These incidents underline a critical reality: the same crisis impacts men and women in profoundly different ways. Therefore, it is essential to examine the experiences of migrant women through the lens of their socio-cultural positioning (Channa, 2020).

B. Women Labourer: Involved in Informal Labour Force

Migrants become more visible during times of crisis. The lockdown in March 2020 thrust internal migration into national focus, as thousands of labourers—lacking transportation—were forced to walk home. According to a World Bank report,[5] the scale of internal migration in India is nearly double that of international migration, with approximately 40 million internal migrants affected during the pandemic, most of whom were engaged in the informal sector. Due to the lack of robust data, it is difficult to determine the exact number of internal migrants. However, it is estimated that more than 80% of migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar work in the informal sector. Daily wage labourers—such as construction workers, vendors, and rickshaw pullers—were among the most vulnerable, lacking any form of social security. During the lockdown: 50% of migrant households had rations for less than a single day[6]. 74% had less than half their daily wages left. 89% had not been paid at all during the lockdown. 96% had not received any government-provided rations. The Supreme Court estimated that 660,000 people lived in relief camps[7], while around 2.2 million migrant workers faced food insecurity and job losses. In response, the Indian government announced a $22.6 billion relief package under the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana*,[8] and the World Bank pledged $1 billion for social protection. Yet, a large segment of the migrant population continued to live hand-to-mouth. These figures help contextualize the crisis as a whole, but a deeper analysis reveals that women, Dalits, and lower-class daily wage earners faced greater vulnerability. The study focuses on exploring these gendered dimensions of the pandemic.

Economic Crisis

During the pandemic, women faced a severe economic crisis. Many lost their jobs due to the surge in unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities. As companies downsized,

[4]https://www.india.com/viral/migrant-woman-delivers-baby-on-road-walks-another-150-km-before-finding-help-4027848/ access on 13.10.2020

[5]https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/covid-19-hidden-majority-indias-migration-crisis access on 11.10.2020.

[6]https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/article31442220.ece/binary/Lockdown-and-Distress_Report-by-Stranded--Action-Network.pdf access on 11.10.2020.

[7] https://main.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2020/10789/10789_2020_0_1_21581_Order_31-Mar-2020.pdf access on 11.10.2020.

[8]https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/covid-19-hidden-majority-indias-migration-crisis access on 11.10.2020.

women—perceived as unable to meet professional commitments due to household duties—were disproportionately affected. The pandemic confined people to their homes, and gender stereotypes pushed women back into domestic roles. Consequently, a significant number of women lost their jobs and experienced heightened stress and financial insecurity[9]. Economic dependence plays a vital role in empowering women and enabling them to participate in decision-making processes. Thus, the loss of economic independence during the lockdown not only affected their financial standing but also diminished their autonomy in both public and private spheres. Past experiences with crises, such as the Ebola outbreak, also demonstrate that women's economic activities tend to decline significantly, while men more readily re-enter the workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic followed a similar pattern, further widening gender inequalities.

Domestic Workers

According to the *IOM World Migration Report*[10], 74 per cent of migrant women are engaged in the service industry, particularly in domestic work. A significant portion of their income is typically sent back to support their families at the place of origin. However, the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent mobility restrictions severely affected their ability to earn, leading to heightened economic insecurity. Upon returning to their native places, many women were subjected to mandatory self-isolation or quarantine periods, which, in some cases, increased their vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence. The *UNDP*, in one of its gender-focused proposals, noted that the informal sector, where most of these women are employed, experienced acute livelihood challenges during the pandemic. In the following section, the author discusses the implications of Covid-19 on migrant women engaged in domestic services, with a focus on their economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities. When feminist discourses were introduced into migration studies during the 1980s, it became evident that women had long been excluded from labour market discussions due to gendered divisions of labour, cultural norms, and the binary segregation of production and reproduction. Scholars began to emphasize the implications of *"being a woman"* in migration contexts, leading to critical inquiries into gendered symbolism and representation in migration (McDowell, 1993b). Hajdu, F., et.al (2013) argued that men were more directly connected to employment through established social networks, whereas women often lacked such access. As a result, migrant women had fewer employment opportunities at destinations, typically limited to domestic service—reflecting deeply entrenched gender stereotypes.

According to the National Sample Survey, there are approximately 4 million registered domestic workers in India, while unofficial estimates place the number closer to 50 million (SEWA, 2014).[11] These women have long struggled for their basic labor rights, including minimum wages, regulated working hours, weekly holidays, and protection against physical and sexual abuse. Despite their contributions, they are rarely recognized as

[9] https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women access on 13.10.20020.

[10] https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf#page=232 access on 12.10.2020.

[11] https://thewire.in/labour/covid-19-lockdown-domestic-workers Access on 15.10.2020.

"workers"; instead, the term "*domestic helper*" is commonly used—a label that suggests social obligation rather than economic exchange. This semantic difference undermines their identity as part of the labor force.

Although legal protections such as the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008) and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) exist, most domestic workers are unable to access these benefits. This is largely because many work across multiple households in a day, making enforcement and registration under formal labour laws highly challenging. The outbreak of Covid-19 and the enforcement of physical/social distancing norms further exacerbated their precarity, as employers were encouraged to suspend domestic help to avoid transmission risks.

Historically, any social crisis or pandemic disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups due to their limited access to resources and protective mechanisms. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable within the migration process—not only because of patriarchal ideology and the invisibility of their labour—but also because their contributions are rarely acknowledged as economic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, women faced additional burdens due to their gender, caregiver roles, and marginalized caste and community status.

Recognizing this layered impact, the UN Secretary-General referred to the pandemic as a "shadow pandemic" for women (Channa, 2020).[12] In India, approximately 94 per cent of women are employed in the unorganized sector—across brick kilns, construction, garment factories, and especially domestic work—where they are denied both social security and dignity (Patel, 2020)[13]. Migrant women, commonly categorized as "associational migrants," often enter the workforce post-marriage (Agnihotri et al., 2011)[14]. However, this pandemic disproportionately affected women engaged in daily wage labour, including street vending, domestic service, and security work—occupations where work-from-home options were non-existent.

The nationwide lockdown led to the closure of industries and the mass dismissal of informal workers, including domestic workers, often under government advisories that framed them as potential infection carriers. Though the government appealed to employers to continue paying wages, the prolonged lockdown triggered widespread economic hardship, making it difficult even for the middle class to comply. Many female migrants were unable to recover unpaid wages from March due to mobility restrictions (Agnihotri, 2020), despite having worked for the entire month[15].

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[12] https://transcripts.gotomeeting.com/#/s/5c63ef2d790052e08dec0e420a9747f489941aa6646f127ac7794f69687ba5df Lecture organized by Govind Ballabh Pnat Social Science Institute, Jhusi under the workshop titled , Gender dimension During Social Crisis

[13] https://transcripts.gotomeeting.com/#/s/5c63ef2d790052e08dec0e420a9747f489941aa6646f127ac7794f69687ba5df Lecture organized by Govind Ballabh Pnat Social Science Institute, Jhusi under the workshop titled, Gender dimension During Social Crisis.

[14] Full text available at:
http://www.cwds.ac.in/researchPapers/GenderMigrationNegotiatingRights.pdf and a summary of the Key Findings at:
http://www.cwds.ac.in/researchPapers/SummaryKeyFindings.pdf

[15] https://thewire.in/women/violence-against-women-social-crisis access on 15.06.2020.

Moreover, the removal of domestic workers during the pandemic was influenced by casteist assumptions about cleanliness. These women, often from Dalit or marginalized backgrounds, were associated with slums and ghettos and perceived as "unclean" or more likely to spread infection. Ironically, while the pandemic emphasized hygiene and sanitation, the poorest were the least equipped to meet these standards—living in overcrowded one-room homes with 6–10 family members, lacking access to bathrooms, clean water, or drainage systems. Physical distancing in such conditions was virtually impossible.

Although the absence of domestic workers during lockdown revealed their critical importance—particularly as the unpaid burden fell on middle-class women—the return of these workers during Lockdown 4.0 was met with suspicion. They were labelled as *"carriers of infection"*, despite the fact that the virus had entered India primarily through international travellers. This reaction reflects Brahmanical caste ideology, wherein the poor and lower castes are seen as impure or dangerous. This was vividly illustrated when returning migrants were sprayed with disinfectant chemicals upon arrival in their hometowns—an act of public humiliation and symbolic purification[16].

The pandemic thus laid bare the intersectional vulnerabilities of migrant women workers, shaped by caste, class, and gender. These women not only lost jobs in urban centers but were also stigmatized upon returning home, making it difficult to find work at the place of origin due to their identity as *"migrants."*

Ambiguity in Governmental Schemes

While the government introduced several relief measures during the Covid-19 pandemic—such as economic support packages and the distribution of ration through the Public Distribution System (PDS)—these initiatives largely failed to explicitly recognize or include women in their design or implementation. Despite widespread wage loss and a resulting food crisis among the poorer sections, women remained systematically excluded from the relief mechanisms. As Agnihotri (2020) notes, only 10 per cent of female respondents in her study reported receiving free rations through the PDS. Some respondents stated that the distribution of rations often depended on personal relationships with local leaders or the heads of *mohallas*[17] (neighbourhoods), further marginalizing women who lacked such networks. Moreover, even those who received rations found the quantity inadequate—sometimes only rice, sometimes only wheat, and rarely both. The inconsistency and insufficiency of these provisions intensified food insecurity among migrant families. Similarly, the government's cash transfer schemes also proved largely ineffective. Only 10–18 per cent of labourers reportedly received these funds. Women, in particular, were further disadvantaged in this process due to structural barriers. In the Indian socio-cultural context, women are rarely recognized as the heads of households. Their bank accounts are often

[16] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/coronavirus-in-bareilly-migrants-forced-to-take-bath-in-the-open-with-sanitiser/article31204430.ece access on 15.06.2020.

17https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/coronavirus-in-bareilly-migrants-forced-to-take-bath-in-the-open-with-sanitiser/article61956440.ece. Access on access on 15.06.2020

linked to their husbands', and they are seldom registered as migrant labourers—either at the destination or at the place of origin—since their migration is typically classified as associational or marriage-based rather than economically driven. According to Agnihotri's findings, approximately 58 per cent of laborers did not receive any monetary assistance from the government. This lack of support forced many migrant women to return to their villages, where at the very least, food and kinship support were accessible. In these circumstances, family and community structures provided emotional and mental relief, offering a degree of security amid uncertainty.

However, this return also marked a reversal in the trajectory of many women who had migrated in search of autonomy and economic freedom. The pandemic forced them back into patriarchal social structures they had once sought to escape. With men now more inclined to maintain a strong connection to their native places—especially after the trauma of the lockdown—the likelihood increases that women will once again be left behind at the origin. This development threatens to curtail women's independent mobility and may inhibit future decisions to migrate, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting their economic opportunities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the multiple vulnerabilities and structural inequalities faced by migrant women, particularly those engaged in domestic labor and the informal sector. During the pandemic, as thousands of migrants returned home empty-handed and economically devastated, it was the *left-behind women and families* who formed the backbone of support. They not only managed the affairs of the household in the absence of male members but also bore the burden of sustaining family livelihoods during and after the crisis. This reinforces the critical need to recognize their economic, emotional, and social contributions within migration discourse. It has also revealed a significant blind spot within migration studies—the condition of *left-behind women*. While much academic focus has traditionally been on those who migrate, it is essential to broaden the discourse to include those who remain at the place of origin.

There is need to include left-behind women as a distinct category. Scholars and researchers must critically expand the scope of migration studies to include Their experiences must be analysed not only in terms of emotional labour but also in relation to economic contribution, decision-making, and social resilience. National agencies like the Census, NSSO, and labour ministries must revise their data collection frameworks to identify women as *migrants in their own right*, regardless of their marital or associational status. Disaggregated data on left-behind women should be collected to better inform policy. Strengthen local governance institutions (Panchayats, Self-Help Groups, Mahila Mandals) to provide decentralized support—both economic and emotional—to women who remain at the place of origin. These systems can serve as community anchors during future crises. The state should create local employment opportunities through programs like MNREGA, skill training, and micro-enterprise schemes targeted specifically at women, especially in high out-migration regions. It is essential to register women as individual workers in migrant databases and welfare boards. This will ensure their autonomous access to government entitlements, bank accounts, insurance, and future relief measures.

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Challenges", organised by Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT), New Delhi, India, Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), Manila, Philippines, Center for Research on North America (CISAN), UNAM, Mexico *2-5 November 2020.*

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and a summary of the Key Findings at:
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