



## Gender and Internal Migration

Welcome to the fourth issue of GenderTalk from the NCAER-National Data Innovation Centre's Gender Hub. In this issue of GenderTalk, we focus on the gender implications of internal migration in India. The drivers of women's migration are complex and can include economic and educational opportunities, cultural practices surrounding family structure and marriage, desire for exploration of new built and social environments, a combination of these reasons, and many more.

GenderTalk is a space where scholars, policymakers, and civil society members can engage with each other on a theme vital to women's well-being in India.

In this edition, we bring you the following:

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## 1. Women's internal migration in India: Data gaps and needs

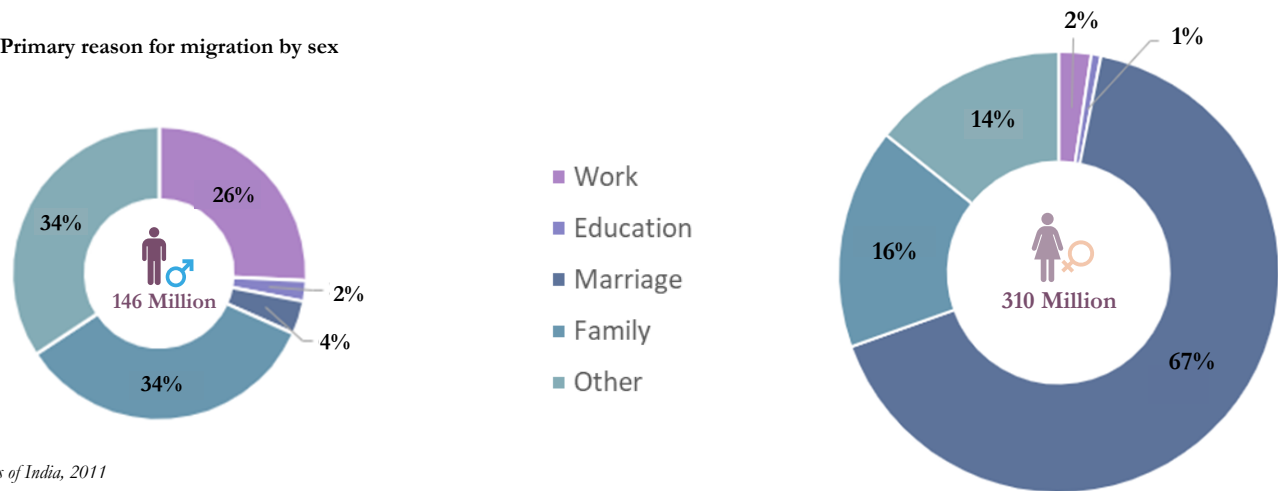
*Reshma Roshania, NCAER*

In this issue of GenderTalk, we focus on the gender implications of internal migration in India. The drivers of women's migration are complex and can include economic and educational opportunities, cultural practices surrounding family structure and marriage, desire for exploration of new built and social environments, a combination of these reasons, and many more.

In India, women comprise the vast majority of long-term migrants. According to the 2011 Census of India, of the nearly 456 million permanent migrants (defined as changing residence from one village/town to another village/town), 310 million (68%) are women; among women migrants, 206 million (66%) report marriage as the primary reason for migration (Census of India, 2011).

Figure 1 shows the primary reason for migration by sex. Among the 41 million migrants who reported permanently migrating for work as the primary reason in the 2011 Census, 15% are women. However, the dominant pattern of migration for work is temporary without a change in domicile. The 64th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) conducted in 2007-2008 addressed this data gap by including items on short-term employment migration, defined as leaving the place of enumeration for more than 30 days but less than six months in the previous 365 days for or in search of employment. The gender distribution of short-term employment migration is similar to that of permanent employment migration – 15% of the estimated 13.6 million temporary employment migrants are women (National Sample Survey Organisation, 2010). Both of these national data sources, in addition to being exceedingly outdated, underestimate movement within the country as they overlook a critical group – circular migrants.

Figure 1: Primary reason for migration by sex

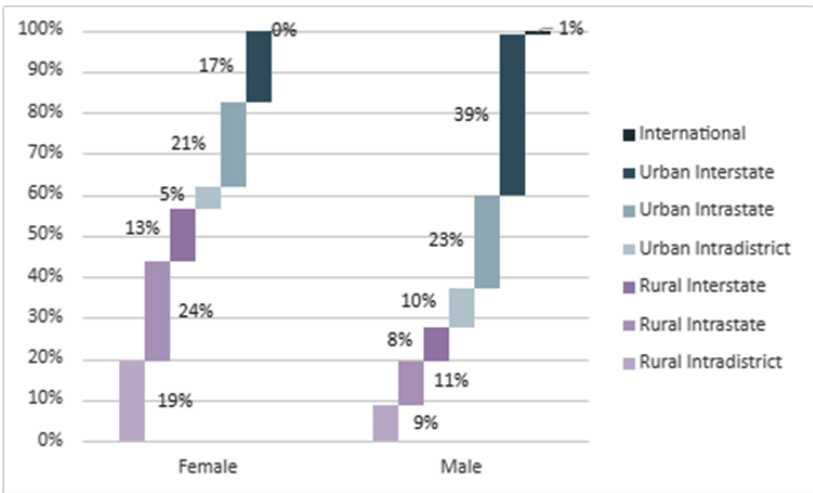


Source: Census of India, 2011

ease of sampling this group, and/or because the policy narrative on migration is primarily from the urban lens with the objective of addressing urbanization. Critically, a key feature across multiple types of women’s migration is rural destination spaces. 72% of marriage migration among women is rural-to-rural; this is not surprising as India is still primarily rural.

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Figure 2: Destination of short-term employment migrants by sex



Source: NSS 2007-2008

Circular migrants repeatedly move between home and destination, often without the intention of permanent relocation (Zelinsky, 1971). Many of the industries that employ circular migrants operate for more than six months of the year, thus not meeting the definition of a short-term migrant by NSS, nor a permanent migrant as per Census. Recent estimates based on employment data suggest that 250 million people are repeatedly migrating between home and various destinations for jobs in sectors including textiles and garments, domestic work, and construction (Deshingkar, 2020). Women substantially participate in many of these areas of work. For example, of the estimated 23 million workers in the brick manufacturing industry (operational for eight to ten months of the year), close to half of migrant labourers are women due to male-female pair recruitment practices.

While micro studies can provide useful data on female migration, those that have been conducted within India tend to focus on permanent, rural-to-urban migration – perhaps because of the

However, migration streams for education also vary by gender; the primary education migration stream for males is rural-to-urban, while for females it is rural-to-rural (Census of India, 2011). This is significant, as overall women and girls comprise 40% of long-term migration for education within the country. Migration streams are highly gendered among short-term employment migrants. Figure 2 shows women move to rural destinations closer to home for temporary work, compared to men who move farther away and to cities.



Gendered migration destinations raise several important questions for which we need more nuanced and current data. For example, how do decision-making processes regarding destinations differ by gender? And do opportunities in rural and urban spaces differ for women and men?

With respect to social implications, to what extent does marriage enable mobility? Conversely, how does unaccompanied migration of younger women for education or work influence later life decisions such as marriage and family structures?

For work opportunities where women circularly migrate with their husbands and children, such as construction, how does nuclearization of the family unit during migration affect women's decision-making power and control over income? In our study of circular migrant families working and living on rural brick kilns in Bihar, we found that traditional gender roles persist during migration with respect to control over income, market purchases, mobility outside the home environment of the brick kiln, and child care and feeding (Roshania et al., 2023).

Better national level detailed data on women's migration are necessary for informing programs and policies, not only for women who migrate, but also for those who remain behind in source areas with migrant spouses.

This issue brings together a wide-ranging view of women's voluntary internal migration in India. We recognize the criticality of gender in forced migration and its relevance in

the Indian context with respect to human trafficking and displacement due to conflict and natural disaster; we also note the importance of gender in international migration from India. While the current issue does not explore these topics, we hope to engage on them in the future.

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Photo Source: Canva











## 2. Women's labour migration: Systems, practices and agency

Neetha N., Centre for Women's Development Studies

Labour migration of women is yet to gain its due in the literature. This non-recognition is largely due to the issues with the macro data on migration, which follows a mono-casual approach to capture migration. The migration rate among women according to the most recent migration survey (GOI, 2020-21) is 47.9 percent for women, as against 10.7 percent of men. However, a huge share of female migrants (87 percent) is captured as marriage migrants and another 7 percent are associational migrants who have moved with their family (Table 1). Labour migration of women as per the macro data sources is negligible, roughly constituting only about 2 per cent of the total female migration. On the other hand, for male migration, employment and associated reasons are the most important ones constituting for about 50 percent of those who have migrated.

limited diversification of female occupations with strong social and class differentiation (Gothoskar, 2013). Given the gendered structure of employment and labour market institutions, who migrates, and the nature of migration are closely related; this cannot be more evident as in the case of migration for domestic work. The gendered understanding of housework and care work, with personal relations being critical in paid domestic work, saw rural women migrating and taking up such work. Poorly educated, and women largely from socially and economically marginalized groups dominate the sector (Neetha, 2019). Domestic work, though highly informal, does provide workers with continuous employment; thus, through these workers do not fall into the permanent

Figure 1: Purpose of Migration

	Rural		Urban		Total	
						
In search of employment/better employment	11.8	0.2	29.9	1.5	22.8	0.6
For employment/work	14.6	0.3	23.6	1.7	20.1	0.7
Loss of job/closure of unit/lack of employment opportunities	12.5	0.3	3	0.4	6.7	0.4
Migration of parent/earning member of the family	12.2	2.4	20.8	19.4	17.5	7.3
To pursue studies	4.9	0.4	4.5	1.3	4.7	0.6
Marriage	11.8	93.8	2.7	69.5	6.2	86.8
Natural disaster (drought, flood, tsunami, etc)	1	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.1
Social / political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc.)	1	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.6	0.1
Displacement by development project	0.6	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.1
Health related reasons	4.7	0.3	1.2	0.4	2.5	0.3
Acquisition of own house/flat	3.2	0.3	3.2	0.9	3.2	0.5
Housing problems	5.5	0.4	4.3	1.8	4.8	0.8
Post retirement	2.3	0	1.2	0.1	1.6	0.1
Others	14.1	1.4	4.7	2.5	8.4	1.7

Source: PLFS- Migration in India - 2020-21

Marriage migration camouflages women's contribution to the family and economy, both as economic agents and as critical drivers in social reproduction. Even when female migration for employment is acknowledged, the concepts and frameworks used for its analysis and understanding are largely based on male-centric models. The lack of reliable data is one of the reasons for the invisibility of women's labour migration and the poor understanding of its specifics. The field-based literature on female migration has brought many insights on the labour migration of women. The heterogeneous nature of women's migration and the correlation between the type of migration and sectors of employment are critical insights that these studies have established (Loess Schenk, 1995; CWDS, 2019). Migration in the contemporary period is noted to have led to relatively

settled, migrant category, they are mostly medium or long-term migrants. However, since wages from domestic work, being low and variable – are not enough to support families in the urban area, the relationship of the migrant with the rural area is found critical. Rural dependence could also be for childcare support, as migrating with children and ensuring their safety is a concern that women migrants at the lower rungs of the informal sector face. Economic dependence on the rural location is also important, which is evoked at the time of any personal crisis, which was evident in the context of the pandemic. Research on female migration for work has also brought new insights into the understanding of existing employment and labour relations and the need to



engender this field. The interlocked nature of employment relationships with semi-feudal bondage and patriarchal practices is an important dimension in the recruitment and employment practices of women. The case of brick kiln and sugar cane workers, who are all migrants, has also brought forth how even progressive labour laws have not been able to accommodate women's labour in such tied labour situations into its ambit (Teerink, 1995). In the *jodi* (male-female pair) system of employment, which is prevalent in these sectors, the contribution of women is tied to the male member. The piece rate wage system prevalent in these sectors denies migrant women access to any direct wage benefits.

Further, the Sumangali system (Vaigai, 2016) noted in the textile industry in South India, which entails employment contracts linked to the system of dowry and marriage, and the documented preference for unmarried girls in many sectors and occupations across the country, clearly shows how women's wage employment, even when based on individual units of labour, are largely determined by patriarchal institutions such as marriage and family.

These systems call for developing new perspectives on specific forms of

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bondage to analyse women migrants, which are outside the existing frameworks.

Poverty, debt, decline in income, lack of local employment, and loss of such employment are the main reasons for female labour migration (CWDS, 2019).

For many poor women migrants, there is a reinforcement of social and cultural inequality with poor wages and adverse terms of employment and thus their migrant status worsens their overall status. Even in these contexts, women migrants do exercise agency at different levels. Within the extremes of autonomy to complete subordination, a spectrum exists where some women can negotiate better depending upon several factors. Personal profiles such as education, age, class background, and social capital contribute to their autonomous status as workers and in exercising agencies both in workplaces and families. However, the literature has also noted the autonomous migration of single women as a strategy to come out of the patriarchal controls and attain social and economic mobility (Chowdhory, 2022). It is true that such migration has not been of sufficient order to challenge the centrality of the patriarchal order in women's work and migration.

Women are also active agents or mediators in labour migration, and this has been established in the context of paid domestic work, the garment industry, and other feminized sectors. In a society where oppressive and caste-based notions of honour exist, young women labour migrants are subjected to a high degree of stigma, especially when they are in the lower rungs of the informal sector (Mazumdar & Neetha, 2020). In this context, it is critical to highlight developments that have adverse impacts on single, autonomous migration such as anti-trafficking laws which, if not implemented progressively, may subvert women's freedom to migrate for work.



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### 3. Female migrants from North-East India in Delhi’s service industry

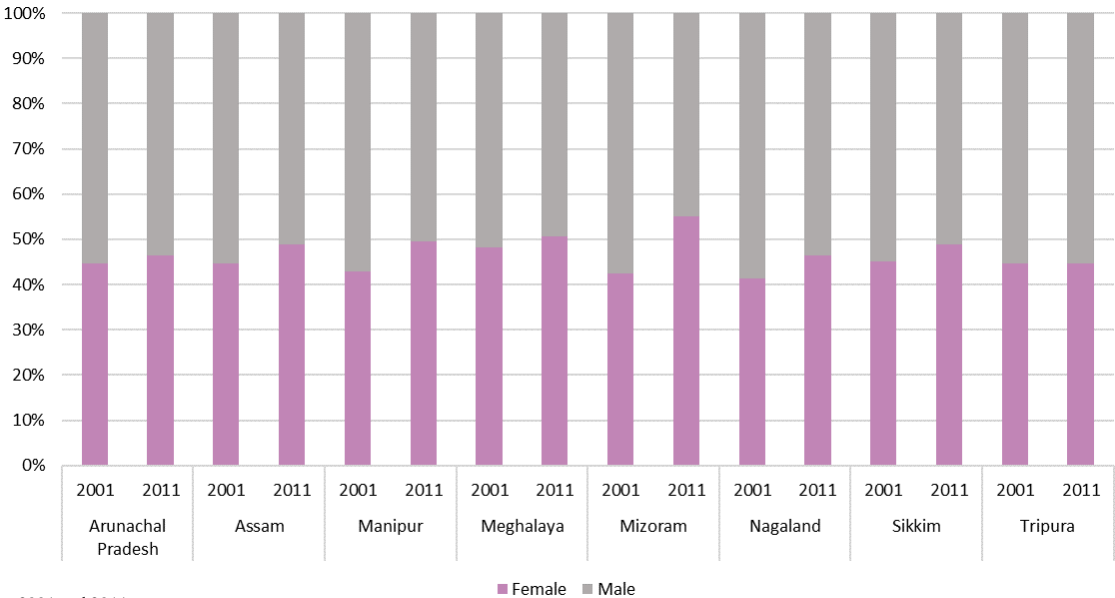
Priyakshi Baruah, Jamia Millia Islamia

Female migration in India has mostly been studied in terms of marriage migration, where a woman changes her place of residence to live with her husband post marriage, or migration along with her husband or family for various reasons, which could be economic, social or political. The category of migration being discussed in this paper is a relatively recent phenomenon- temporary migration of women, mostly unmarried, unaccompanied, low-skilled or semi-skilled and originating from rural regions of the North-Eastern states of India to bigger cities of India, to explore livelihood options in the booming service industry.

Census data for the years 2001 and 2011 show a decline of about 0.5 per cent in the share of migrant population from the North-Eastern states of India residing in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi.

However, in terms of the male-female ratio, it is found that the proportion of female migrants, among the total migrants from North-East India, has increased from 43.9 per cent in 2001 to 48.8 per cent in 2011. As shown in Figure 1, except for the state of Tripura, the share of female migration from all the North-Eastern states has climbed up, with Mizoram showing the highest increase (from 42.6 per cent in 2001 to

Figure 1 : The percentage of female and male migrants from North-East India residing in the in NCT of Delhi



Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

The growth of the service industry, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, seems to be the dominant source of attraction for this strand of migration (McDuie-Ra, 2012; Remesh, 2012; Kikon & Karlsson, 2019). Within this category of migrants, young and unmarried women have a very high presence (Kikon & Karlsson, 2019; Baruah, 2022).

49.5 per cent in 2011).

Due to their racial similarities with people from East and South-East Asia, men and women from certain regions of North-East India are seen, by employers of the retail and hospitality industries, as suitable for working in the



concerned jobs to be able to put up a ‘cosmopolitan’ experience for their customers, particularly ones that work for international brands or ones that are based on East or South-East Asian themed products. Just as the décor and costumes that are usually seen inside most East or South-East Asian styled restaurants and massage parlours (e.g. Chinese restaurants, Korean restaurants, Thai spas, Japanese spas, etc.) are designed to match the cultural theme of the place, in a similar vein, workers too tend to be stylised to camouflage with the so-called cultural theme. For this purpose, migrants from North-East India tend to be the preferred pool of workers.

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In the course of my doctoral research, I have also found that the migrant status adds to the feasibility of the North-East migrants to engage in these jobs. Particularly in the restaurant and spa jobs, several women who live with their families, married women, or women who have relatives living in Delhi or nearby, show reluctance towards working in these industries for the fear of being ridiculed or prejudiced by relatives for the apparent low status and sexual stereotypes associated with these jobs. Therefore, women migrants from North-East India, who are staying far from their families, opt for these jobs. Moreover, when it comes to the mobility and the working status of women, cultural norms for women in the North-Eastern societies also tend to be much more liberal as compared to other parts of India. Thus, migrant women from the North-Eastern states readily take up jobs in these sectors, and often even enjoy the moral support of their families for their work. Therefore, working in the service industry provides these women, who mostly come from a rural background and with low education, a platform to earn

their livelihoods, become financially independent, provide economic support to their parents and siblings, fulfil their aspirations of living and working in the cities, and experience a symbolic form of upward social mobility through participation in high consumerist spaces like international retail showrooms, restaurants, and shopping malls.

However, due to limitations in terms of educational qualifications and skill diversity, and perceptions and experiences of discrimination in other fields of work, most of these women find their opportunities restricted to specific jobs in the service industry. As a result, the concentration of migrant women in specific job roles in restaurants/ cafes, beauty salons, massage parlours, etc. causes a reinforcement of the stereotypes that tend to sexualise and exoticise North-Eastern women.

Several studies also show that migrant women and men from North-East India have frequently faced discrimination in the national capital from landlords when they look for accommodation in the city (McDuieRa, 2012; Remesh, 2012;). Certain stereotypes were being attached to the identity of North-East migrants that make the host society perceive North-Easterners, particularly women, as ‘too outgoing’, or ‘too casual’ or ‘frequently partying types’, etc., which tend to give them the notoriety of being troublesome tenants due to which house-owners often display an unwillingness to accommodate North-East migrants or charge them with unfairly higher rents.

Therefore, it is essential to identify the needs and concerns of migrant women and also to understand that different migrant groups have differential experiences and needs. Also, the importance of skill development and skill diversification should be recognised by the government, both at the national as well as the local levels. Unless efforts are made to do away with social stigmas and social risks that are associated with certain occupations, which are providing livelihoods to a large population of women, economic and social empowerment of women cannot truly be achieved.



Photo Source: Canva



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## 4. Intermittent migration: Female agency within marriage and beyond

Priti Ramamurthy, University of Washington

With good reason, the scholarship on female migration in India has largely been about marriage migration as it is the largest permanent migration stream in the world. The near universality of marriage, and its features of patrilocality, and village exogamy (especially in the populous states of North India), make it so. The emphasis on marriage as an end and the presumed stability of female migration after marriage is consolidated by the periodic National Sample Surveys (NSS) in their choice of data categories. The NSS classifies females as ‘single migrants’ (also called solo migrants), ‘marriage migrants’ (who move on marriage) and ‘followers’ (of husbands some years after they have moved to the city). We cannot grasp the dynamics of female migration within and beyond marriage from this data.

I draw on research with migrants to two cities, Delhi and Hyderabad, to understand how rural migrants to the informal economy make urban India. How do they remain entangled with their villages? How do they make and re-make the city and the village and themselves in the process? My collaborator, Vinay Gidwani (University of Minnesota) and I aim to tell humanistic stories, to acknowledge the poetics of ordinary lives.

Oral history interviews are our primary research methodology. We interviewed a hundred and thirty-five people in Delhi and Hyderabad *bastis* (slums) and accompanied ten back to their villages. The women were domestic service workers, janitors, street vendors, *dhobis*, beauty service providers, and garment workers. Women who were not doing paid work but mainstays of their household economies as *basti* property

owners, who rented out their properties, and small-time contractors were also interviewed. Fourteen such stories are shared in our book, *Between: City Lives, Rural Ties* (under review). Although each story is singular, each life is also paradigmatic, revealing the larger forces at play in contemporary India.

Our interviews with women revealed that migration is not a one-off event. Over the course of their lives, they shape and re-shape the timing and direction of their own migration in surprising ways.

Women left-behind in villages by migrant husbands initiate migration to the city to escape the interminable drudge of domestic work -cooking, cleaning, sweeping-swabbing, caring for the elderly and children and those who are disabled or sick -for the entire extended marital household, often of eight to ten people. Putli and Usha, impoverished, Rajput women from Uttar Pradesh, were restricted from moving outside their marital households, overburdened with domestic labor and emotionally and physically ill-treated by their in-laws. Impossibly, for young daughters-in-law who, in keeping with Rajput caste-patriarchy (*‘ladki jaat hai’*), wore their *ghunghats* (veil) low and literally did not know their way around their marital villages; they imagined, plotted, and acted, to escape.

However, the break is never complete. Nearly everyone continues to be embedded in trans-local households, intergenerational and spatially split between the city and village (Ramamurthy, 2020). Inevitably, even the women who escape the hellhole of their village marital households,

return to the marital village from time to time (Ramamurthy and Gidwani, 2021). But many now do so on their own terms. As moral selves, they come to value the transformations enabled by migration as moral transformations. Getting paid work in the city or earning an income by selling beauty services, street food, or parlaying property into rental income are some of the ways women developed this ability.

Nor is the direction of intermittent migration only away from their marital villages to the city. Women, like Putli, run away from their husband's domestic violence in their conjugal city households to go back to their natal villages for care. The structural violence of the lack of access to affordable health care in the city is another reason why women return for medical treatment and recuperative care to their village *maikes* (mothers' homes). This, too, is temporary, treated as a reprieve, but often is a recurring one.

Intermittent migration within marriage is not the only phenomenon we observed. Beyond the boundaries of marriage, a few married women shared stories of how they have spent time with a man other than their husbands. Once, her husband's relentless drunken beatings led Putli to run away with a male friend to a strange city. He was kind and wanted to marry her. He, too, was Rajput, her caste, but she chose not to as she was not attracted to him. She anticipated that, in time, he would make her send her son back to his father. Improbably, Putli returned to her husband after a few years, as she still found him "beautiful". But on her own terms. His taunts that she is a dirty woman don't stick. She earns an income from her work as a janitor. She knows from her city neighbors that there are anti-domestic violence laws. The respectability she gets as a married woman in the city and her natal and marital villages is incontestable, she reasons.

Young, unmarried women, in their twenties and early thirties, shared their stories of intermittent migration with a

romantic friend or lover. Meena, from an Adivasi village in Jharkhand, has been migrating for child and elder care work since she was a child of eight. She's been to Ranchi, Chandigarh, Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad to work. Though free time is scarce for live-in domestic service workers, Meena used to take her charge down to a park to play every day, where she met and fell in love with Mahesh, relatively "upper caste" and Telugu, who worked as a driver. Their love story, on Meena's admission, sounds straight out of a Bollywood film.

It's one of intermittent migration to Bengaluru to escape her middle-class employer's and Mahesh's parents' wrath; to her natal village, to abort her out-of-wedlock pregnancy; and back to Hyderabad to work and save for their wedding. Ujjwala, a garment worker, Dalit, from a village in Uttar Pradesh, has a boyfriend in Delhi, with whom she has gone to see the Taj Mahal and other romantic spots. She returns to her native village from time to time. She finds the gender norms extremely constricting in the village but goes back as she is educating herself and takes her exams there, first for a B.A and now an M.A degree.

Why pay attention?  
Because intermittent migration is an important expression of female agency, a creative strategy which women turn to from time to time, if not permanently.

**Intermittent migration is an important expression of female agency, a creative strategy which women turn to from time to time, if not permanently.**

It may seem a small intervention but, in the context of their lives, it is nothing short of remarkable.

Intermittent migration demands new kinds of data, capable of capturing the dynamism of female movements between natal and marital villages and cities. To address the underlying reasons for intermittent migration we need to change norms which invisibilise and naturalize domestic labor as the work of females, especially daughters-in-law.



We need to fight caste-patriarchy as keeping both these hierarchical systems in place. The state needs to provide women in trans-local households with adequate income, health care, education, freedom of mobility, and social protection against domestic violence and work-place harassment in both villages and cities. As creative expressions, intermittent female migration provides glimpses into the meaningful ways women are stealing moments of pause and pleasure.

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## 5. Role of Marriage Migration in Determining Women's Autonomy in the Indian Context

Esha Chatterjee, IIT Kanpur

Internal migration is a key indicator of changing population dynamics within a country. It is driven by several factors such as employment opportunities, education, climate-related factors, and marriage. Literature on migration usually centers around who migrates and who doesn't, and on how migrants assimilate in the destination. Focus on gender in these broad areas is limited. Most of the literature on the determinants of migration focuses on men's experiences, particularly in the context of distress-related and labor migration. Gender is incorporated into this by examining feminization of labor migration or by looking at the role male migration plays in impacting the lives of left-behind wives (Desai and Banerji 2008; Gulati 1993; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Lei and Desai 2021).

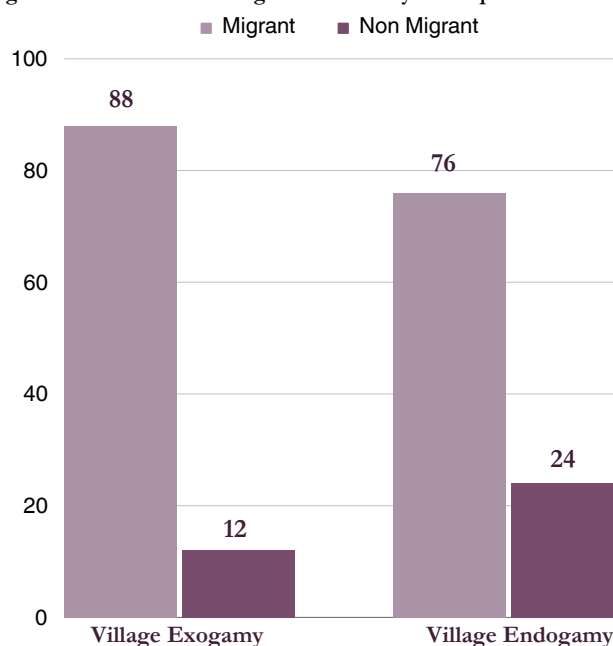
There were about 400 million internal migrants in India and about two-thirds of them migrated because of marriage (UNESCO 2013). Even though migration for marriage is one of the main reasons behind migration, particularly for women (about 87% female migrants primarily migrate because of marriage) (Government of India, 2022), there is not enough focus on the understanding of this type of migration. Using data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2011-12 for more than 34,000 ever married-women aged 15-49, our paper examines how women's autonomy in different spheres is shaped differently by: a) actual migration (women physically migrating for marriage); and b) by norms in a woman's community around marriage migration (Chatterjee and Desai 2020).

Our paper highlights two distinct facets of marriage migration: one indicating a change in the community of residence post-marriage (whether a woman grew up in the same place where she stays post marriage); and the other indicating norms in a woman's community (whether in a woman's community or caste group it is permissible to marry a daughter within her village).

We further examine how these two aspects can differentially impact women's (a) physical autonomy (whether they can go alone to visit friends, relatives, health centers, grocery, etc.), (b) economic autonomy (full-time employment in wage work), and (c) autonomy with regard to civic participation (involvement in self-help groups).

There is a weak relationship between actual migration and kinship patterns and an even weaker relationship between geography and kinship patterns. For example, in communities where it is permitted to marry within one's own village (village endogamy), few women end up marrying in their own village. This could be because there is possibly a greater preference towards marrying a 'more qualified' groom.

Figure 1 : Distribution of Migrant Women by Kinship Pattern



Source: India Human Development Survey 2011-12, Chatterjee and Desai, 2020



Again, for women who belong to communities that traditionally do not permit marrying grooms belonging to the same village (village exogamy), living in an urban area (a city like Delhi for instance) doesn't mean not marrying within Delhi, but rather means not marrying someone belonging to the same native village (Grover 2017). Figure 1 shows that 12% of the women in our sample who belonged to communities that do not permit marrying someone from the same natal village stay on in the place where they grew up post-marriage, whereas about 24% of women who belong to communities which permit village endogamy live in the same village after marriage too.

Findings from our study show that non-migrants (those who grew up in the same place where they continued living after marriage) are more likely to be employed in full-time wage work compared to marriage migrants, that is those who migrated physically to a different place from where they grew up. This could partly be because women's economic autonomy, indicated by a greater likelihood of participating in wage work, could add to the family income and thus is subject to lesser curtailment compared to other forms of autonomy.

Additionally, non-migrant women's local social networks would help them find jobs in the area.

In comparison, norms in a woman's community about marriage migration are associated with all three aspects of women's autonomy. Women who belong to communities that permit marriage within their natal village are likely to have higher physical autonomy, economic autonomy, and greater civic participation.

**In communities where it is normative to marry outside one's natal village, there is a 'social distance' between the bride and her in-laws.**

This is because in communities where it is normative to marry outside one's natal village, there is a 'social distance' between the bride and her in-laws; whereas in communities

where marriages within the same village are permissible, brides have greater connection with their natal family and there are lesser restrictions on their mobility. These developments do not occur in one generation but unfold over a large time period and are ingrained as a part of gender norms in a community, impacting both non-migrant and migrant brides.

In conclusion, norms about marriage migration in the community to which a woman's family belongs have a greater role in determining some dimensions of her autonomy in the public sphere compared to her physical migration to a new geographic area. Geography and culture are connected and evolve over time; culture and social norms shape and are in turn shaped by marriage migration.

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## 6. Conversation with Manju Rajput

Manju Rajput, Aajeevika Bureau

Aajeevika Bureau began its operations in 2004 with a vision to provide sustainable and lasting solutions to the socio-legal, economic, and other institutional challenges that are faced by migrant workers and their families, as they work and live in precarity to secure their survival.

**Q1. When men migrate to cities, women are often left behind to sustain their families. Can you describe the Family Empowerment Program that work to empower such women? What primarily catalysed working with women who remain in source villages?**

In the 2014 Rajasthan State's Migration Profile published by Aajeevika Bureau, it was identified that 56.6% of the households surveyed had at least one male member who is a migrant. As the men migrate, women are triply burdened by the weight of managing finances, household work, and providing care in addition to taking care of any other social/community responsibilities.

The impact on women was not just physical and financial but had a psycho-social dimension as well.

A lot of the literature uses the term 'left-behind' when referring to the women at the source. Such language imagines women to be natural companions to men in their migration journeys, having no identity or moorings tying them with the source. With a fervour to challenge this discourse and to foreground women's identity, the Family Empowerment Program (FEP) mobilised women to initiate conversations about their rights and public entitlements.

As women grappled with their new realities, the FEP provided a space where they could come together and discuss their issues towards a resolution. Creating sense of ownership and inspiring the desire to take control of their lives and livelihoods among the most marginalised section of this community, the women, formed the bedrock of the program's engagement.

Soon, with increased participation, conversations around violence against women became central and brought out women's immense vulnerability at home and in the streets. Over time, such women's groups started to take shape as collectives, at the village or *fala* and block levels. This was the start of the *Ujala Samoohs*.

The *samoohs* were led and mobilised by Ujala Mitras, who are community volunteers. Soon the *samoohs* began to coordinate with the local trade unions and the workers' collectives to hold demonstrations, social dialogues with government representatives along with social security linkage camps. At present, there are 625 *Ujala Samoohs* with a total membership of 16,000 women.

**Q2. How did you expand your programming to include (a) women and (b) adolescent girl migrants?**

a) The Rajasthan State Migration Profile and the other internal migration mapping studies had pointed toward a significant movement of workers from Rajasthan to Ahmedabad and Surat. This included a large number of women who migrated with their spouses or families to such destinations. Thus, further strategy discussions were focused on expanding our engagement with migrant women, at the source and destinations. In Ahmedabad, our efforts started in 2008 with an initial attempt to mobilise domestic workers. Later, the focus shifted towards the establishment of creches for the safety of children at the worksites. The efforts in Surat began in 2018-19 with an initial focus on topics related to payment of wages, health and social security linkages. At the same, the *Pravaasi Mahila Suraksha Sangathan* was setup at the source to offer pre-migration counselling support to migrant women and focusing on concerns pertaining to gender based violence.

Over the years, a lot of the team's efforts at the destinations have been directed toward women's health given our observations on how poor health coupled with poor access to facilities had a direct impact on migrant women's income. In Surat, cases of mass hysterectomies among migrant women have also come to the forefront.

Violence against women is another major area of focus that emerged through women's sharings at the *Mahila Shram Shakti Kendras* set up for women migrant workers in Ahmedabad and Surat.

b) A 2017 internal survey in the rural blocks of Salumber district was pivotal in shifting our gaze to the world of work occupied by adolescent girls, particularly in the construction sector. The views of the contractors were also crucial as some of them shared that the 'beauty' of the adolescent girls dictated their hiring from the labour nakas. The study also revealed some interesting insights on how adolescent girls felt a sense of independence and confidence as they began to work. On the other hand, there remained a constant moral panic among their family members around the sudden freedom that adolescent girls were found to exercise and the possibilities of them entering 'unwanted' associations.

The collectivising and mobilising work of women into *Ujala Samoohs* was also reproduced with the adolescent girls, who are now members of *Kishori Samoohs*. In our work with adolescent girls, our aim has been to provide a space

for them to build confidence and to express themselves, while also addressing important concepts such as sexuality, gender and power through capacity building and training.

As a next step, we aim to discuss the subject of adolescent girls' rights at their workplaces by addressing safety and hygienic provisions at work, wages, overtime work, etc. These are topics that the *Ujala Samooths* currently explore with women at source and women migrants.

**Q3. What are the typical demographic and socio-economic characteristics of such women? Can you tell us of some of the challenges that female migrant workers face and what kind of interventions that policymakers should focus on?**

Most of Aajeevika Bureau's work is concentrated in Southern Rajasthan in the rural blocks of districts such as Udaipur, Salumber, Dungarpur, and Banswara among others. Here, migrant men and women are largely members of the Scheduled Tribes, hailing from the Bhil, Garasiya and Meena tribes. At the outset, migration results in breaks in accessing basic facilities such as food, health and education for children. The burden of collecting resources to cook and maintaining continuity in children's education falls on women. Healthcare remains elusive for women who now grapple with staying and working in extremely unhygienic setups, often continuing to work through ill health and pregnancy. Schemes like insurance and maternity benefits offer no support outside of the source. Additionally, the health workers maintain an extremely discriminatory outlook, treating migrant workers with derision. In cases of emergency, we have found that migrant workers prefer to return to the source than avail of any support at the destinations.

Here, a policy level consideration towards portability of basic entitlements such as insurance schemes, ration and even claims for education becomes crucial. These will not just positively impact women and their families at destinations, but also single male migrants who are unable to avail of benefits under any of the schemes they may have enrolled in at the source. It must also be noted that such a policy vision must be preceded by a data collection activity within states to understand the volume and nature of inter-state as well as intra-state migration.

Migrant women workers often live in open spaces and at worksites, among large groups of men. They are highly vulnerable to violence not just at the hands of those immediately around them but also at the hands of police and the larger establishment that leaves no opportunity to criminalise migrant workers.

Amidst insecurity and violence, the fear of displacement also looms large. Creating housing possibilities in the form of hostels and/or shelter homes is one way to proceed. Another way would be to look at giving legal recognition as

slums to the open spaces that workers live in. This could be one way for basic facilities such as functional toilets, regular water, electricity, Anganwadi centres, and public/community health centres among others to become accessible.

A sensitisation exercise and consistent engagement with the police and local administration at the destinations and various other source locations must be initiated on priority. In partnership with the Rajasthan police, the FEP Team has been successfully able to operationalise a more gender-responsive Community Policing Program. Under this program, Mahila Help Desks have been set up by women volunteers from the local community at five police stations across three blocks of Banswara District. This motivated women at the source and returnee migrant women to actively bring forth cases on a range of issues from trafficking, domestic violence, and workplace harassment to other forms of gender-based violence.

**Q4. What are the similarities and differences with respect to working with these different groups – women whose family members/spouses have migrated out, and women and adolescent girls who are themselves migrants?**

There are three groups of women that the FEP closely works with.

(a) The first are the women at the source, whose family members may have migrated out. They, then, become the primary interface between the home and the ration shop, the panchayat, the banking correspondent, the schools and all other community spaces which may have all been limited to the men's domain of interaction. This group, then, requires support in coming to terms with the absence of men at a personal and social level. Ensuring that they are aware and able to access their entitlements is one of our primary objectives.

(b) The second group is constituted of women who migrate with their families to the destinations. In contrast to the source, women struggle to find work alone at the destinations.

They, thus, seek work in *jodis*, i.e., as part of a couple with their husbands. This is mostly true of the construction sector. Women are not acknowledged as workers irrespective of their level of skilling. They are, then, relegated to menial tasks of cleaning or coolie work that is often derogatorily categorised as 'light work'. They also return to their residence only to perform more reproductive labour such as cooking, child rearing, cleaning etc. Housing is another big challenge for these women as safety becomes a primary concern. At the destinations, women struggle to avail basic minimum facilities such as cooking fuel/firewood, healthcare or even a community to support during emergencies or pregnancy, all of which they may have received back in their villages. This increases their workload manifold.



(c) The third group are adolescent girls. While some adolescent girls work locally, some others also migrate. Early marriage of adolescent girls is another problem statement that we are faced with. Some other adolescent girls manage their studies and household work alongside working locally or migrating. At Aajeevika Bureau, we are still exploring the contours of our engagement with this geographically and characteristically diverse group that is often extremely distrusting. There is fear of being reported, which may hurt their families and their incomes. At the risk of economic exploitation at work, subjected to eve-teasing and other forms of sexual violence on their way to work or by the contractors, while finding very limited spaces in their homes to exercise their voice, we believe that adolescent girls are one of the most vulnerable groups.

While the level of vulnerability, workload and degree of access to some entitlements such as housing, health and food may differ for these three groups, some characteristics that are typical to the group members' identity as women remain similar.

At the outset, women's incomes and work in all three settings are considered secondary to that of men, despite their role in economically and socially sustaining the household at the source and destination, they are never considered to be the primary earners. There is a constant attempt to discredit women's identity as workers. Further, at the workplace, there is no remuneration for equal work and employers/contractors tend to hire women to save costs.

Despite having an economic share and contributing to household labour, all three categories of women possess no decision-making power at home. As de-facto heads, they return to a 'secondary position' the moment the male returns from their migration.

Undoing these very notions lies at the heart of FEP's interventions and considerations when mobilising women and adolescent girls. For women to build a voice

**For women to build a voice and believe that they have an equal stake as members of their communities, as workers and as citizens is our goal.**

and believe that they have an equal stake as members of their communities, as workers and as citizens is our goal.

#### **Q5. What are some of the challenges you've come across in your work in these areas? What were the solutions?**

One of the first challenges that is common to any such mobilisation work is building trust and rapport. Extended working hours of women workers at the source and destinations, leave them with no time to speak or interact. The team visits the women multiple times and attempts to

engage with a few light group activities, discussions and even games. Among the groups, speaking to adolescent girls and getting those who are part of our *samoobs* to speak has been a big challenge. Adolescent girls are often found supporting household work, engaging in wage work and sometimes also keeping up with school/college work simultaneously. They often do not want to speak about or reveal any information about their age or even their working conditions which could potentially cause more trouble for them. The FEP Team visits the homes of the adolescent girls' multiple times, attempting to equally engage with their parents and family members. The police and the political establishment, especially at the local levels, are extremely sceptical of such women's groups and collectives. Our attempt is to not only sensitise the establishment through capacity building or training programs, but we also actively invite them to any events organised on International Labour Day and International Women's Day. Bridging the gap between the democratic establishment that is designed by and for the people, encouraging women's participation and inculcating the values of citizenship are at the core of the *samoob's* mandate.

#### **Q6. What are Aajeevika's future steps in working with women migrants and those who remain behind?**

Aajeevika Bureau aims to focus more on solidifying its interventions at destinations such as Gujarat and Maharashtra. The idea is to create a strong connection between the source and the destination at the institutional (police and state administration level) and at the field level (among trade unions and *sangathans*) to ensure that women's cases whether pertaining to payment of wages, experiences of violence among others are transferred with ease and addressed uniformly at the source and destination.

Our Mahila Help Desks at police stations and sensitisation trainings with the police personnel in Rajasthan have set a strong example that can be followed at the destinations. We also aim to introduce and pilot similar trainings within the grievance redressal system, i.e., with the labour helpline and women's helpline callers. Helpline callers, being the first responders to any urgent situations, are often ill-equipped to support migrant workers speaking in different languages. The objective is to sensitise the helpline callers and enable them to at least support migrant workers by directing them to resources that are in the latter's native languages.

On the collectivisation front, we aim to solidify the foundations of our existing *sangathans* by proceeding to the next level and registering them as formal unions. Historically, women have been excluded from trade unions owing to the same reasons that prevented them from being acknowledged as workers. Formalising our *sangathans* into unions would be a primary step towards making the joint vision of worker

dignity, gender just and inclusive. We visualise a future where our learnings from such mobilisation can be disseminated and could serve as models for other worker collectives to take up nationally.

**Manju Rajput** leads the Family Empowerment Programme at Aajeevika Bureau. She specialises in conducting training on women's rights and extends technical support to partner organisations. Manju has been with Aajeevika since 2012. She holds an MA and MPhil in Sociology from Mohanlal Sukhadiya University (Udaipur) and Rajasthan Vidyapeeth (Udaipur) respectively.



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