



## FEMALE LABOUR MIGRATION IN INDIA

### KEYWORDS

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### Introduction

In India the situation of women is worse especially the women migrant workers. Even after 61 years of its freedom more than 1/3rd of the total population. Still continuous to live in poverty, lack of access to education, ill health, homelessness, unsafe environment and social discrimination and exclusion from the main stream. Women migrant workers are one of the most invisible and deprived groups of people. They have no voice for claiming any rights for help. The economic, social, cultural and political factors influence the decision to move. According to an estimate by the National Commission on Self Employed Women 1988. Of the total women workers about 94 percent are in informal unorganized sector alone, whereas just 6 percent of them are in the organized formal sector.

Labour migration is getting feminized especially in developing countries. Trade liberalization and market orientation have had far reaching consequences on the pattern of demand for labour. In many developing countries export led economic growth and an invitation to foreign capital have given a big boost to electronic, chemical, information technology and garment industries which by and large employ significant number of females. While the international changes have had favourable impact on the highly skilled professional educated manpower, unskilled uneducated casual labour-force faces an increasingly competitive labour market for a comparatively low wage under undesirable working conditions. Since women are ready to work for any wage, and perceived as passive and docile, they are in great demand, contributing to feminization of labour and feminization of labour migration. No doubt these labourmarket changes have had their impact on rural-urban migration as well, female economic migration being more pronounced in the recent ten to fifteen years. Changes in the rural economy have contributed to this increased female migration. Increasing productivity in agriculture has been associated with decreasing opportunities for wage employment in agriculture for women when compared to that of men.

### Types of Female Migration

The real world phenomenon indicates three distinct types of female migration

**(a) Autonomous female migration:** Many middle and upper middle class women migrate to cities for improving their educational credentials and also to get suitable employment apparently in a quest for social advancement and also to enhance their status in the marriage market. Among the semi-literate, young girls migrating to towns/cities to work in export processing units, garment industry, electronic assembling and food processing units is continuously on the increasing in the recent years. **(b) Relay Migration:** To augment family income, families

which have some land holdings in the rural area, send the daughters to work mostly as domestic servants where they are safe in the custody of a mistress. First the elder daughters are sent out and she is replaced by the second, third and so on, as one by one get married. **(c) Family Migration:** Here the wife instead of staying back in the village prefers to join her husband in the hope of getting some employment in the destination area. Family migration among agricultural wage labourers who have no land or other assets to fall back at times of crisis is becoming increasingly common. Moreover in the poorest groups male dominance is generally tempered by women's contribution and marriage works in a more inter-dependency mode. It is such groups which migrate in family units to urban destinations in search of employment prospects for both.

In recent literature female migration is linked to gender specific patterns of labour demand in cities. In both South East Asian and Latin American cities plenty of opportunities are available to women in the services and industrial sectors especially with the rise of export processing in these regions. It has been established that women are no longer mere passive movers who followed the household head. In fact daughters are sent to towns to work as domestic servants. From an early age girls become economically independent living on their own in the cities and sending remittances home. This kind of move has been characterized by Veena Thadani and Michael Todaro (1984) as 'autonomous female migration' and has resulted in Thadani-Todaro model of migration. However studies indicate that the independent movement of young women in South Asia and Middle East as labour migrants is very rare and associated with derogatory status connotations.

But with trade liberalization and new economic policies, gender specific labour demand has motivated many young Asian women to join the migration streams in groups or with their families to cash-in the opportunity. In the Indian context it is not clear whether wage employment has helped them to overcome poverty since for an outsider there is nothing emancipating in bad work conditions, low wages, over work and discrimination.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are (a) to highlight interstate differentials in the magnitude composition and pattern of female migration, (b) examine the extent of employment oriented migration of female migrants in the working age group and (c) examine the economic activity pattern of all female migrants even if the cause has been identified as 'marriage' or 'movement of parents'.

**Table 1**  
**Magnitude and Pattern of Internal Female Migration (percent)**

State	Intra District	Inter District	Total	From other states	From other countries
<b>Central Region</b>					
M.P	64.2	25.6	89.8	10	0.08
U.P	62	32.3	94.3	5.4	0.35
<b>Northern Region</b>					
Haryana	42.11	41.23	83.3	16.3	0.41
Punjab	50	33.7	83.7	15.8	0.5
Rajasthan	66.9	24.3	91.2	8.7	
<b>Western Region</b>					
Gujarat	63	28.6	91.6	8.1	0.33
Maharashtra	54.1	30.6	84.7	15.2	0.16
<b>Eastern Region</b>					
Bihar	66.9	27.9	94.8	5.2	
Orissa	76.1	19.2	95.3	4.7	
West Bengal	71.9	18.5	90.4	7.1	2.4
<b>Southern Region</b>					
A.P	70.8	22.6	93.4	6.5	
Karnataka	70	20.5	90.5	9.4	0.11
Kerala	76.4	17.5	93.9	5.3	0.76
Tamil Nadu	58.6	34.5	93.1	6.1	0.83

Source: (Computed from) Household Survey Data of NSSO 55th Round.

Marriage is a dominant factor in female mobility and due to the custom of marrying off women within the close circle which does not normally involve long distance migration we find 60-70% of migration taking place within the same district. (Table1)

Coming to female migrants from other states (interstate) Haryana (16.3%) Punjab (15.8%) and Maharashtra (15.2%) top the list with more than 15% of the migrants from other states. The reasons could be numerous. Punjab and Haryana being neighbor states, interstate movement is perhaps high. Being prosperous states they also do attract migrants from other nearby backward states both men and women. Women in the status of spouse or as employment seekers. Maharashtra is one among the very few states which attracts migrants from almost all over India. In all the three cases prosperity and employment potential are the major reasons for in-migration. Karnataka,

West Bengal and Tamil Nadu take the fourth, fifth and sixth positions respectively. Rajasthan and Gujarat have 8.7% and 8.1% respectively. In-migration from other states is the least for Orissa, Bihar and U.P. The obvious reason is backwardness of these states. Women development is so poor in these states

that one cannot expect women from other states to enter into these states either on grounds of marriage or employment. M.P contrary to our expectation has 10% of the migrants from other states, may be due to its location. The problem here is while we have data on in-migrants into a particular state (say Tamil Nadu) we have no data on out-migrants from that state. This means Tamil Nadu women who migrate to U.P or Gujarat are analysed as migrants of that destination state but whose behavior may be different from the behavior of local migrants of that state. Moreover in-migration from other states constitutes less than 10% of total migrants for all the states except for Haryana, Punjab and Maharashtra. So we have restricted our further analysis to intra district and inter district migrants only.

The percentage of female migrants from other countries is an insignificant figure. Except for West Bengal which is close to Bangladesh, no other state receives more than one percent of the total women migrants from other countries. In the case of West Bengal, women from Bangladesh enter legally and illegally in search of employment and also for marriage because of the porous borders. Next to West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka receive women migrants from other countries, may be from Sri Lanka. Of late Tamil Nadu attracts lot of foreign students which includes women as well and this could be one of the reasons. The percentages are 0.83 and 0.76 respectively.

**Table 2**  
**Magnitude of Rural-Rural, Urban-Rural, Rural-Urban and Urban-Urban Migration (percent)**

State	RR	UR	RU	UU
<b>Central Region</b>				
M.P	63.6	3.1	17.7	15.6
Excluding	67	3	17	13.2
U.P	69	4	15	12
Excluding	70.8	3.6	14.8	10.8
<b>Northern Region</b>				

Haryana	34.5	2.9	33.9	28.7
Excluding	34.5	2.2	34.6	28.7
Punjab	54.4	5.1	19	21.5
Excluding	58.2	5.1	17.2	19.5
Rajasthan	64.7	4.1	16.1	15
Excluding	67.2	3.7	15.8	13.2
<b>Western Region</b>				
Gujarat	49.2	4.6	25	21.1
Excluding	52.7	4.9	23.2	19.2
Maharashtra	46.1	5.3	28.1	20.3
Excluding	51.8	5.9	23.5	18.8
<b>Eastern Region</b>				
Bihar	75.8	3.1	13	8.2
Excluding	77	2.8	13	7.3
Orissa	77.2	2.9	14.3	5.5
Excluding	79.1	2.5	13.3	5.1
West Bengal	58.6	3.5	19.3	18.5
Excluding	61.7	3.5	16.4	18.3
<b>Southern Region</b>				
A.P	54	6	25.1	14.9
Excluding	55.8	3.8	25.3	13.1
Karnataka	54.8	5.5	20.3	19.4
Excluding	58	5.2	19.8	17
Kerala	50.1	6.6	27.3	15.2
Excluding	52.4	5.6	27.7	14.2
Tamil Nadu	46.7	7.1	23.7	22.5
Excluding	48.1	7	23.4	21.5

Source: (Computed from) Household Survey Data of NSSO 55th Round.

The Rural-Rural (RR), Urban-Rural (UR), Rural-Urban (RU) and Urban-Urban (UU) classification for the identified female migrants is available in Table 2.

### Independent Migration of Females

A perusal of historical trends in migration in India would clearly reveal male selective migration in 1970s and 1980s, family migration (where women also join the migration stream instead of staying back in the village) in 1990s and from late 1990s onwards, independent female migration in response to employment opportunities in the semi-urban and urban areas in addition to male selective and family migration. In South East Asia from an early age girls become economically independent living on their own in the cities and sending remittances home. In South Asia, where a woman's movement as labour migrant used to be rare and associated with derogatory status, a change in migratory pattern is observed since the early 1990s. In India economic liberalization and in particular trade liberalization has created gender specific labour demand where women either migrate in groups or with their families to avail the newly found opportunity. More importantly the setting up of export processing zones not only changed the pattern of female migration but also increased the proportion of women in the labour force who are mainly in paid employment. The preference for women employees on the part of employers is mainly because women accepted lower wage, are not unionized and do not protest much against unpleasant working conditions.

But from NSSO data one cannot answer the question whether independent migration of females is on the increase since details on who migrated first, whether alone or with peer group/family and who took the decision to migrate are not furnished. But one can tentatively arrive at the magnitude of 'autonomous female migration' indirectly by using 'marital status'

and 'relationship to head' as proxy variables and this is what we have attempted in our analysis here.

Both micro level data i.e., data pertaining to all the female migrants in the age group 15-60 and disaggregated data i.e., female migrants classified on the basis of their movement as Rural-Rural (RR) Rural-Urban (RU) and Urban- Urban (UU) (excluding migrants from other states and other countries) have been used to gain necessary insights into the behavioural patterns of female migrants.

The marital status of the women in the age group 15-59 for the major fourteen states in India for all female migrants put together reveals that both for developed and developing states 90-94% of the women are married. However the figures are slightly lower for all the southern states and West Bengal.

### Employment Oriented Migration

Let us consider long term migrants for whom the reasons for leaving the last usual place of residence are collected under the following heads: (a) in search of employment (b) in search of better employment (c) to take up employment/better employment (d) transfer of service/ contract (e) proximity to place of work (f) studies (g) acquisition of own house/flat (h) housing problems (i) social/political problems (j) health (k) marriage (l) migration of parent/ earning member of the family and (m) others. Since our aim here is to analyse only the employment oriented migration of females, in Table 3 data has been pooled and provided for five reasons only viz, in search of employment (which includes causes (a) to (e) above), studies, marriage, migration of parents/earning members and others. Migration due to housing, health and social/political problems are insignificant and hence omitted.

**Table 3**  
**Reasons for Migration for the Women in Migrant Households (For all streams of migrants) (Percent)**

Major States	Employment	Studies	Marriage	Migration of Parent/ Earning members	Others
<b>Central Region</b>					
Madhya Pradesh	1.8	0.2	88.8	7.2	2
Uttar Pradesh	0.9	0.1	91.2	5.7	2.1
<b>Northern Region</b>					
Haryana	1.1	0.2	85.5	10.5	2.7
Punjab	1.5	0.3	87.8	9	1.4
Rajasthan	1	0.3	87.2	9.8	1.7
<b>Western Region</b>					
Gujarat	1.6	0.4	82.1	13.5	2.4
Maharashtra	2.9	0.4	73.7	18.7	4.5
<b>Eastern Region</b>					
Bihar	1.3	0.1	94.1	3.6	0.9
Orissa	1.6	0.2	86.3	8.5	3.4
West Bengal	1.8	0.2	83.2	9.5	5.3
<b>Southern Region</b>					
A.P	3.6	0.5	71.1	20.4	4.4
Karnataka	3.4	0.7	79.9	11.8	4.2
Kerala	2.7	0.7	69.4	17.2	10
Tamil Nadu	3.3	0.6	73	17.5	5.6

Source: (Computed from) Household Survey Data of NSSO 55th Round.

Employment oriented migration constitutes 3-4% while marriage is the predominant reason for migration for females. Data on migrants who mentioned 'employment' as the reason for migration for RR, RU, UU category is available in Table 2. The figures are uniformly low for all the states. But inter-category and inter-state variations are significant. Among rural-rural migrants the percentage is high for Tamil Nadu (5.8%) and Maharashtra (4%). Haryana (3.1%) comes third followed by Karnataka (2.8%) tops the list followed by A.P (6.2%) and Tamil Nadu (3.8%). Among the UU migrants women's labour force participation seems to be low. Except for Haryana (7.9%) none of the other states (with the exception of Karnataka 5.4%) have significant percentage.

Inter-state variations in employment oriented migration and female selective migration are quite understandable. Women development is not uniform through-out the country. Whether a woman participates in migration or not depends on her (a) social role (b) capacity for making decisions and exerting autonomy (c) access to resources and (d) existing gender stratification in origin and destination areas.

### Conclusion

In a hierarchical society like India where other factors such as marital status and age are as important as economic earnings in influencing women's status, it is not clear whether the independent movement of women to cities and employment in industrial units has helped to gain autonomy and empowerment. One study carried out in Sri Lanka on women employed in garments, coir, electronics, tobacco and construction comes to the conclusion that subcontracting has led to invisibility of these women workers who are at the bottom of the employment hierarchy, lack of recognition of their rights and instability

of employment. These women choose to support their families in low waged work since the only other alternative is unemployment and consequent dire poverty. Similar studies in India reveals health hazards due to unpleasant working conditions, worsening of work burden on women and increased risk to sexual harassment migrant women who opt for self-employment as vendors and service providers remain invisible in official labour statistics and hence are unprotected by national labour legislations.

Micro level case studies indicate high levels of rural urban migration among females for reasons of employment. Secondary data analysis though indicative of this trend does not help us to arrive at the magnitude of such migration. Moreover, unlike in earlier years where male selective migration was predominant, the latest trend is one of family migration where both the male and female migrate, irrespective of the fact whether female employment opportunity is reckoned or not at the time of making a move. But women's labour force participation after migration steeply increases and this is evident from the NSSO 55th round data. In view of rising urban ward migration and increased labour force participation of women after migration, questions related to sanitation, water housing, educational and infrastructural needs require greater attention at the level of policy planning and implementation. Since women are a highly heterogeneous group migration among females should not only be understood as a poverty reducing strategy but also as a strategy of economic diversification, upward mobility and desire for personal growth and autonomy. Micro level case studies are warranted to understand the intricacies involved in female migration.

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