

Understanding Migration from a Gender Perspective

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Abstract:

The process of migration has historically been dominated by men in a society. However it has impacted women in certain specific ways.

Patriarchy and a traditional mindset of society have made individual migration of women a rare phenomenon. The stereotypical roles bound them and restrict them to the four walls of the house. As a result, it is the men who typically migrate in search of job opportunities and hence share a very significant relation with the process of migration. Having said this, the society has evolved under influence of modernisation and globalisation which has resulted in a relative increase in the individual migration of women.

Women may be affected as associational migrants, as left behind wives of their migrant husbands or as individual migrants.

The paper makes an attempt to understand each of these aspects and their impact on the women involved.

Introduction:

Migration as a process has a very complex relation with women. This is because migration affects them in varied ways. They may be affected as associational migrants, as left behind wives of their migrant husbands or as individual migrants. It is interesting to understand each of these aspects and their impact on the women involved.

In the Indian society, the individual migration of women has been a rare phenomenon. Patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles prescribed by the traditional culture are the causal factors. Women are treated as women only and not as human beings. Hence they experience discrimination, exploitation and inferiority at the hands of the men. The gender identity of women is most prominent. This provides them with a framework within which they have to think and behave. The stereotypical roles as wives and mothers restrict them to the four walls of the house and chalks out duties and responsibilities within the four walls. As a result, it is the men who typically migrate in search of job opportunities and hence share a very significant relation with the process of migration.

The role of women as migrants can be more prominently understood within the context of associational migrants and left behind wives of migrant husbands. Having said this, the society has evolved under influence of modernisation and globalisation which has resulted in a relative increase in the individual migration of women.

Let us therefore take into consideration each of these aspects.

Women as Associational Migrants:

Associational migrants may be understood as those who migrate in connection to a particular event or a particular person. In simple words, they do not migrate on their own.

For the largest time known, women have been associational migrants. This is understood in terms of marriage related migration. Women have migrated to their husband's homes as a part of the custom in majority of Indian households. This is not merely the physical movement to a new place but more importantly entails the crucial adjustment phase to the new home, new surroundings and new people.

The patriarchal character of the Indian society and the concomitant subordination of women have their impact on the adjustment process. The newly married women may find themselves totally dominated by husbands and more so by the in-laws. They may not be given an opportunity to voice their views or opinions freely. The stereotypical values and upbringing actually prevent them from asserting themselves and creating an identity of their own. This type of a subservient existence is a reality for many women even today, more so in the rural areas. Lack of education and financial dependence on husbands only add to their subservience.

Many times the husbands migrate to cities and take along their wives with them. This also characterises the women as associational migrants. It also brings in its wake a crucial adjustment process along with the struggle for survival. A large proportion of the migrants are the poor, for whom migration is not for better career prospects but is for sheer survival. Women who are the associational migrants in poor families have to bear tremendous burden of making ends meet. They have to experience harsh living conditions such as living in congested and crowded slums, unfamiliar neighbourhood, glaring poverty, poor health facilities and marginalised existence. Thus migration may bring untold misery in its wake. It pushes the women to the brink by grinding them into a continuous struggle for survival.

Women as Left behind Wives of their Migrant Husbands:

Migration as a process has always being a part of human existence. However in the recent times, it assumed more significance after the advent of industrialisation and urbanisation. Industrialisation created new job opportunities and encouraged people to migrate to industrial-urban areas in search of better life prospects. It was this situation which impacted women's lives and brought changes in their life situation. When people migrated to industrial-urban areas, these people were essentially the men. Men generally left their villages without their wives and children.

In developing countries like India, usually rural to urban migration is the most dominant pattern of internal migration. Males, who are pushed by structural poverty and enter in migration streams as a survival strategy, dominate this migration pattern. The urban areas are considered as unsuitable for the entire family to migrate. Men who migrated alone could easily find accommodation in dormitories or could share a small room along with other male migrants. Bringing their wives would essentially pose issues of safety and security along with additional financial burden. This forces the men to migrate without their wives and makes women as left behind wives of their migrant husbands. Migration has a profound influence on the status of left behind wives in the family. There are both positive and negative factors involved in this context.

On the positive side, male migration provides economic relief to their families. Some studies show that in the absence of husband overall status of women improves as they have greater access to money which they can spend as they wish; they have the freedom of movement; they can take independent decisions regarding the education and health-related issues of their children. Women's involvement in decision-making is a positive sign of their autonomy.

Nevertheless, absence of husband makes the life of a wife difficult. Her workload increases as she has to take care of several other things, which culturally are done by men. Apart from doing the regular household chores and taking care of children, she has to work in agricultural fields. Wives experience a certain amount of emotional stress when they have to bear the responsibility of making decisions in the absence of their husband. Apart from increased responsibilities, frequent thoughts about the safety of migrant husband add to mental stress of left behind wives. Thus, the added responsibilities of managing family, children and financial matters, anxiety about safety of husband and self, and the problems associated with isolation, altogether create a condition of stress among left behind wives. There is hardly any available literature focusing on mental stress on wives left behind by migrants.

Women's involvement in decision-making is a positive sign of their autonomy. But when they are forced to take that role in the absence of their husbands, they may undergo severe mental stress, as they are illiterate and less exposed to the outside world in a male dominated society. In such a situation their dependence on others (family members and friends) increases even for petty things.

Male migrants get indulged in extra-marital sexual relations at the place of destination as they are away from their wives. Single male migrants have a much higher chance of getting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS. Such male migrants become carriers of such infections and they expose their wives to such infections whenever they visit home. This suggests that the prevalence of STDs and AIDS may be higher among the left-behind wives of migrant men than among the wives of non-migrant men.

Women as Individual Migrants:

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Though relatively less in proportion, the individual migration of women is not an unknown, unheard phenomenon. Women have started migrating on their own for advancing their careers, for better life prospects and for fulfilling their dreams. They are ready to face the challenges and risks of fighting it out single-handedly without the support system of their family. They become fiercely independent, assertive and strong-willed individuals.

However, individual migration may not always paint a rosy picture for all the women migrants. There are instances of women falling into traps and ending up ruining their lives. Women who are well-settled in their careers may get carried away by the fast life of the cities. With no family support or supervision, availability of disposable income, attraction of ultra-modern lifestyle and peer-pressure they may choose a path which digresses from the traditional, stereotypical gender roles. It may portray them in a wrongful manner and put them in a problematic situation.

In a disturbing trend, young Indian women are increasingly migrating overseas - driven by poverty and abandonment - almost always through illegal channels. Despite a government ban on migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women under 30 years, a report by the Centre for Social Research on migration in India revealed that the number of women migrants was steadily increasing. Immigration rules of the Indian government clearly prohibit women below the age of 30 years from migrating. "But in reality, from field level observations, it was evident that a lot of women below 30 years of age had migrated," the study said.

Speaking on the issue, CSR chief Ranjana Kumari said it was a matter of concern that women were migrating unchecked. "Unskilled women, who are clearly the most vulnerable section, are being sent off by agents to various countries. Very often, they have no idea where they are being sent, have no knowledge of the language or their rights," Kumari said. There is an absence of any prospect or promise of employment, yet they keep migrating. This is a disturbing trend, as in the event of not getting employment, they end up as victims of sexual abuse. Even if they get employment, they have to work under inhuman conditions.

A large proportion of women are working in the informal sector. Construction is the largest sector in India after agriculture which employs the poor migrant women. The working hours are from sunrise to sunset. The work place is unsafe. The workers have no welfare schemes such as social security, compensation to injuries, access to drinking water, and health care. India has the world's highest accident rate among construction workers. A large number of women migrants work as domestic workers. They are willing to work for much less than those who are already working. They are victims of constant verbal and sexual abuse, working without any grievance redressal mechanism. The next large group of migrant workers consists of sex workers who are exploited physically, emotionally as well as financially.

The Road Ahead:

Migration is an ongoing process. It will continue to impact women be it as associational migrants, as left behind wives of migrant husbands or as individual migrants. Presently, all these three aspects have been unfavourable and discriminatory towards them.

It is therefore pertinent to create adequate opportunities of empowering the women. As associational migrants, they need to become strong-willed and assertive to tide over the crucial adjustment phase involved, both, in marriage and in their migration to impersonal cities. As left behind wives of migrant husbands, they need to focus more on the autonomy they have at their disposal. More importantly, they need to be more proactive about their health-related rights, given their vulnerability to the exposure to STDs and AIDS. They can organise themselves in a strong-knit group to assert their rights and also to overcome their loneliness. As individual migrants, they need to guard themselves against the exploitative mentality of the larger society which perceives them as single and defenceless.

The road ahead is surely laden with obstacles. But grit and determination alone can facilitate women to walk this road.

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