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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a massive toll on lives as well as livelihoods. The lockdown initiated in its wake brought nearly all economic activities to a staggering halt. With no work and no home to go to, stranded migrant workers began walking or cycling for miles in the scorching heat. As these visuals became viral, the hitherto invisible and taken-for-granted migrant worker became hyper-visible – on the highways, streets, bus stands and railway stations. However, the gendered aspects of migration have been overlooked. The discourse created around the plight of migrant workers is largely androcentric. Policy responses have abysmally failed to acknowledge the presence of and problems faced by female migrants, leave apart addressing these. This paper asks some pertinent questions. What are the challenges faced by female labour migrants? Why should an androcentric discourse be problematised? What should be the policy responses and what is the role of the state in abating the crisis faced by migrant women? It is argued that female migrant workers are a socio-economic entity forming a crucial and indispensable component of the migration question.

Keywords: COVID-19, migration, female labour migration, informal sector, gender inclusivity

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Invisible among the Invisible: Women Migrant Workers and State Apathy

Aishwarya Bhuta

The phrase 'missing women' was coined by Amartya Sen to describe the abysmally low sex ratios in developing countries. However, women are not only a numerical minority. History, being his story, has often obliviated their accounts. Politics has not accorded them adequate representation. STEM has continued to be a male-dominated terrain. Be it academia or industry, sports or defence services, patriarchy has ensured that the women continue to be missing, or few. So is the case with narratives and discourses, which largely revolve around men. In a man's world, women are outside the margins.

Characteristic of an apathetic state, a nationwide lockdown was initiated barely at a notice of four hours to curb the COVID-19 pandemicin March 2020. It brought almost all economic activities to a staggering halt. In India, where over 90% of the workforce is in the informal sector, such a lockdown had a devastating impact on the working class. Along with a health crisis, a large section of migrant labour became the victim of a citizenship crisis. The cities they built refused to give them refuge; they became dispensable the moment their labour was no longer required. This resulted in what was considered the world's largest exodus - massive reverse migration from the cities back to their rural hometowns. The journeys were arduous and not easy. Apart from the hardships, they bore the stigma of being super-spreaders.

Amidst the returning crowds were single or pregnant women; those with young children, and those suffering from pre-existing medical conditions and disabilities. The migrant workers became visible, but not the women among them. Low levels of education and language barriers resulting in lack of access to information put migrant women at greater risk of infection. What are the other hardships that they have been grappling with? What is the role and responsibility of the state when a significant proportion of its most vulnerable population is combating more than one crisis? Given the dearth of gender-inclusive and -responsive frameworks, is there anywhere for the migrant women to go? From androcentric discourses and media narratives to inadequate state response, women are missing from the conversation.

This paper makes a strong case for gender sensitivity, especially in times of the pandemic. It is an attempt to initiate a discussion around the problems faced by female labour migrants during the pandemic. It questions the conspicuous absence of women from migration discourses, social dialogue and policymaking. More importantly, it demands greater accountability of the state towards some of its most marginalised and exploited citizens – the significant yet invisible female labour migrants.

The untold story of women migrant workers

Pandemics affect men and women differently. Alongside gender-based violence and discrimination, women are often victims of multiple oppressions resulting from caste, religion, race and ethnicity, or disability. Female migrants in the informal sector face greater vulnerability compounded by exclusion from social insurance. Following are several challenges faced by informal women migrants.

Loss of employment

The economic impact is disproportionately higher on women due to their concentration in the sectors worst hit by the pandemic (International Labour Organisation, 2020). The Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2018-19 pegged the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) at 18.6%. This is abysmally low, implying that less than one in five females is in the labour force. The ongoing pandemic has aggravated the crisis of an already declining female LFPR as females are more susceptible to layoffs and retrenchment during the

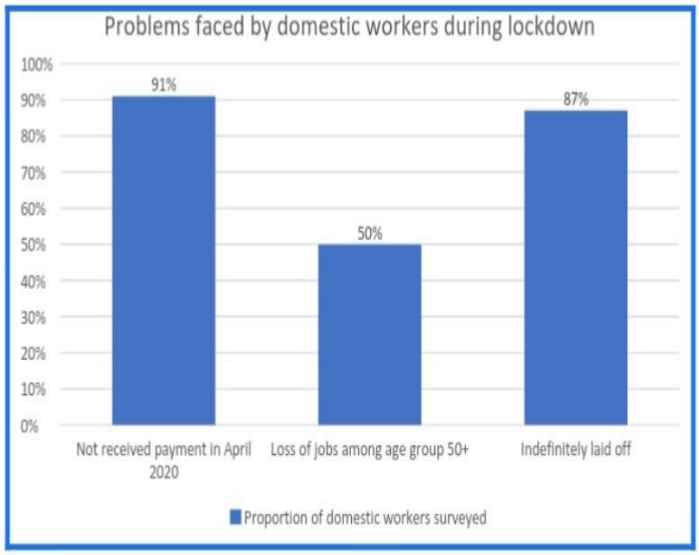
lockdown.

Although the absolute number of males who lost their jobs in the first month of the lockdown was higher than that of their female counterparts, the proportionate decline was greater for the latter. Nearly 39.5% of females reported a loss of employment as compared to 29% of males. Moreover, the worst affected were rural women, 43% of whom are estimated to have lost their livelihood (Rukmini S., 2020).

The plight of domestic workers

A vast majority of female labour migrants work as domestic workers in cities. Their employment is informal and insecure in the absence of safety nets. Many of them are single women who migrate from rural areas in search of livelihood opportunities for supporting the family. Others are women who have migrated along with their husbands. They often face caste discrimination in their workplace. During the pandemic, they have also been victims of class bias. The elite and middle class housing societies have branded them as super-spreaders and declared them out of bounds. Many households have laid them off indefinitely. For live-in domestic workers, this also results in the loss of living space (UN Women, 2020).

With most employers not paying them any subsistence during the lockdown, they are dependent on government relief programmes. However, migrants often do not have a ration card with a local address, which results in their exclusion from the public distribution system. The following figure represents their socio-economic conditions during the lockdown.



Source: "91% of domestic workers not paid during lockdown: survey" (2020)

According to a survey of 2,500 domestic workers undertaken by Domestic Workers' Rights Union (DWRU), Bruhat Bangalore Gruhakarmika Sangha (BBGS), and ManegelasaKaarmikara Union, 91% of them did not receive any payment for April (ibid.). Nearly half the workers above the age of 50 lost their jobs. Around 87% of the workers were asked not to return to work until contacted again. Those being paid wages are also facing a pay cut of 50% or more.

Another survey by the Domestic Workers Sector Skills Council under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship was conducted across eight states. It revealed that the instance of reverse migration among domestic workers wasapproximately 23.5% ("85% domestic workers not paid during the lockdown, says survey", 2020). This implies that three-fourths of the domestic workers are stranded in the cities without a job and income, notwithstanding the loans to be repaid. In such circumstances, welfare measures such as cash transfers and universalisation of the public distribution system by the state become inevitable.

Women with disabilities and the lack of access to public healthcare

COVID-19 is contagious and the virus can remain on surfaces for several hours. Precautionary measures involve avoiding all forms of human contact through touch. However, for persons with disabilities, tactile experiences are essential for survival. Women with visual or hearing impairment, physical and many other forms of disabilities have been rendered helpless during the pandemic.

For instance, VT and her husband are visually impaired and sold handkerchiefs in the local trains of Mumbai (Shinoli, 2020). With local train services suspended during the lockdown, they were left with no other means of subsistence. On the one hand is the immediate concern of going on with life as usual with minimum contact; a task uphill for someone who cannot work without touching and feeling things. On the otherhand, there is anxiety about the present and the future. Even after the trains resume, it might be difficult for them to sell handkerchiefs as people would be wary of buying as they did before.

A large number of disabled persons are marginal own account workers engaged in tasks which cannot be performed virtually, such as street vending or running

small shops. Thus, work-from-home is an unviable alternative for them. With savings exhausting soon, low-income families with a differently-abled member have to face the critical choice between medicines for the latter or food and rations for everybody else. It is nearly impossible to ensure physical distance for those with severe disabilities who are entirely reliant on a caregiver. Moreover, they are also more likely to be infected by the virus owing to their pre-existing poor health conditions.

Lockdown, isolation, stigma and social exclusion are not new phenomena for the disabled for whom these experiences form an everyday part of their lifeworld (Muralidharan, 2020). The state through its various institutions should have ensured regular access to essential supplies through doorstep delivery, timely disbursal of disability pensions, alongside facilitating easy access to the public health system not only for COVID-19 but also their pre-existing medical ailments. Unfortunately, those not registered under various welfare schemes were left to the mercy of NGOs and other activists.

Gender-based violence

During the pandemic, women migrant workers are at greater risk of violence both inside and outside the home. Self-isolation, home quarantine or lockdown-mandated confinement aggravates the risk of sexual and gender-based violence as well as intimate partner violence committed by alcoholic husbands. The UN terms the 20% global increase in cases of domestic violence as a 'shadow pandemic' (Roy, 2020).

The National Commission for Women reported the doubling of domestic violence complaints in the very first week of lockdown beginning late March. From March to April 1600 calls were received from Delhi alone (ibid.). However, the instances might be much higher given the fact that often victims cannot ask for help as they do not have access to a phone. The increased burden of care work alongside physical violence and harassment can jeopardise their mental health.

Incidents of several female frontline health workers being assaulted and ostracised in their neighbourhood by the residents have been resurfacing since the lockdown began. Nurses at a Ghaziabad hospital alleged misbehaviour by quarantined patients (Bajpai, 2020). Thus, women are safe neither indoors nor outdoors. Restricted mobility, closed medical clinics, and fear of contracting the virus also prevent migrant female victims from accessing healthcare and emergency support services (UN Women, 2020).

Questioning an androcentric discourse

In his multiple addresses to the nation, the Prime Minister of India repeatedly invoked a hyper-masculine war narrative in the context of the pandemic. The pandemic was equated to a battle to be won. Frontline health workers were christened as COVID warriors. However, this was a rather exclusionary category as it did not include the sanitation workers and scores of other essential service providers who continue to be on duty at grave personal risk. Women migrant workers are predominant in emergency services, domestic work and care work which are essential yet undervalued. These jobs are characterised by temporary or no contracts, meagre wages, and long hours of work without adequate compensation (International Labour Organisation, 2020). Hardly any attention was paid towards protecting the health of the health workers themselves, the majority of them being women who also have to perform a second shift of unpaid care work in the household.

Naturally, the humanitarian crisis of migration continues to have a male face. Whether of bus stands, railway stations, or long queues, none of the heart-wrenching visuals propagated by popular media captured the trials and tribulations of female labour migrants. Those few women captured were shown to be accompanying their husbands and young children. However, there was not even a whisper about the single women migrants stranded after being laid off by their middle-class employers. hey remain invisible, unaccounted, undocumented, uncared for, and forgotten. Aptly put by a women's rights activist in Dharavi: "Media sensationalised the issue ever since the first case was reported from Dharavi. Now that they are praising the Dharavi model, it is media's responsibility to highlight our issues of unemployment too." (NT Sarasvati, 2020b).

The hidden agenda behind propagating the visuals of crowded terminuses was to blame the irresponsible migrants for spreading the contagion. However, the state was not held accountable for its condition. The emerging narratives were centred upon the male migrant. The plight of the women scarcely made it to mainstream news channels and popular media platforms. For instance, a large number of garment factories in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu employ young women aged 18 to 30 from the states of Odisha, West

Bengal, Jharkhand, and Assam (Ghosh, 2020). They are being forced to work in conditions of semi-bondage without adequate precautions. Their dues are not settled to prevent them from returning home. Under severe stress and agony, they kept waiting for travel arrangements to be made for them by the Odisha state government. Many such tragic narratives are excluded from the mainstream discourse on migration because it is primarily considered a male problem.

Sapra (2020) argues that the middle-classisation of cities has created employment opportunities for single migrant women. They perform care work and other domestic chores in a number of urban middle class households. However, it is much more difficult for them to return to their rural home than it is for their male counterparts. Often, their own families discourage them from returning because of the relatively higher wages that cities provide. Another concern is the hostility that women are subjected to public spaces. Single young women walking or cycling back home are highly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking. Far from being an inclusive space, the public domain does not offer women safety from the male gaze and other predators. Alongside valid concerns of safety, the lack of access to clean public toilets or sanitation facilities is a major hindrance, especially for menstruating, pregnant, lactating women or those with infants and young children. There is a strong case to be made for the women's right to the city as a space providing safety, freedom, equal and just treatment.

On the one hand, women's narratives were not included in parochial androcentric discourses. On the other hand, stories of women braving all odds were either appropriated or manipulated as narratives of empowerment (Thapliyal, 2020). For instance, when a 15-year-old cycled over 1,200 km from Haryana to Bihar with her injured father on the pillion seat, the Cycling Federation of India invited her for a cycling trial to test her strength and physical endurance. No questions were raised as to why she was compelled to take such an arduous journey which could have cost her life. The valorisation and near romanticisation of her ordeal is an attempt towards quelling any possible protests from civil society regarding the citizenship crisis under which the migrants are reeling.

Perhaps the most battered section of female labour migrants is the home-based workers. Nearly one-fifth of urban women workers are home-based. Once enumerated as marriage migrants, they are not considered economic migrants or workers. One of the largest employers of home-based women workers is the textiles and garments industry. Having migrated with their families and not being in a position to return to cities, many women workers in Ahmedabad are left with no choice but to work for a pittance of ten to fifteen rupees per day (Thomas & Jayaram, 2020).

Most informal women migrants lack access to urban welfare schemes owing to a lack of the required documents and a bank account. Home-based workers are victims of both patriarchy and capitalism; the first does not allow them to work independently and assert their rights while the other continues to exploit them for extracting surplus value. Shrouded by the apathy of employers as well as the state, their labour remains unrecognised and undocumented. They can neither claim citizenship in the cities nor their rights and entitlements as workers. They continue to be invisible despite comprising a significant proportion of the informal sector.

Gender-sensitive and -responsive frameworks are a prerequisite for inclusive policymaking. The conspicuous absence of women from mainstream and malestream narratives and discourses shape the consciousness of civil society as well, obliviating the former from their conception of both the migrant and the worker. If the state also remains ignorant of their quandary, the discrimination of female labour migrants on the lines of gender, race, caste, and class will continue unabated. The state must initiate gender-inclusive social dialogue for effective policy responses to address the humanitarian crises concomitant with the pandemic.

Women migrant workers and state apathy

The hitherto invisible migrant workers have emerged as a socio-economically and politically disenfranchised entity suffering from critical socio-cultural, legal, rights and welfare deficits. That they are referred to as 'migrant' workers itself reflects an anti-poor bias. It reinforces the dichotomy between the insider and the outsider; the worker is a migrant and thus cannot be a citizen. This process of othering legitimises or normalises their disenfranchisement and disempowerment. Perhaps an exception is the state of Kerala which has been making efforts to ensure the well-being of its 'guest workers'.

The pandemic has exposed the blatant disregard of the state towards its poorest citizens. The sudden lockdown did not allow the migrants an opportunity to arrange for a journey back home. The exorbitant fares of Shramik Special trains run almost a month and a half later were

out of their reach. Those who sold what they had and managed to buy tickets had to travel for days without food or water. Instances of women losing their lives while standing in the long queues for tickets or ration, delivering a baby during a journey, or of a child crying beside the corpse of his dead mother momentarily shook the conscience of the nation, but not that of an unfeeling and uncaring state.

For single mothers such as AN working as domestic workers for a monthly salary of merely ₹10000-20000, the loss of livelihood has compounded their problems (NT Sarasvati, 2020a). House rent, electricity bills and loan instalments are to be paid notwithstanding other expenditure of children's education and medical treatment of the elderly. They hope for financial assistance or alternative employment opportunities from the state. More than the pandemic, callous government response and failure of public policy are to be blamed for this humanitarian crisis. Through its unplanned and mismanaged lockdown, the state has subjected its working people to hunger, hardships and humiliation. It has abdicated its responsibility when welfare measures such as universalisation of public distribution system, cash transfers, rural as well as urban employment guarantee programmes should be its utmost priority.

The weakening of state institutions

Moreover, far from being a welfare state, both central and state governments have allowed the country to become a police state in the name of enforcing the world's largest and most stringent lockdown. From migrant workers at railway stations to vegetable vendors and slum-dwellers, police and other civic body personnel have not shied away from subjecting the poor and minorities to violence with impunity in the name of punishing lockdown violators.

Apart from state apathy and police brutality, poor women also suffered inhuman treatment at the hands of hospital authorities. One such example is from Manipur where a 20-year-old pregnant woman died after being denied admission by five hospitals (Leivon, 2020). Many similar demise have been reported from various cities during the lockdown. Be it negligence of the leadership, the ruthlessness of the police, or the heartlessness of the hospital authorities, the state and its various institutions have not only failed but also devastated its most deprived people. The following words of anguish coming from a migrant worker who feels disowned by her state, Odisha, reflect the terrible state of affairs.

> We think the Odisha government is not willing to take us. There is a nexus between employer, recruitment agencies in Odisha and the local police here. Now factories have started operating and we are forced to work.Weare even asked to work 12 hours for two days in a week. (Ghosh, 2020).

In her historical analysis of the problematic between state and capital, Das Gupta (2016) argues that the nation-state is indispensable for the development of capitalism. Since the early 1990s, the economy is being restructured in accordance with the neoliberal agenda. The alliance between the public institutions of the state and the private institutions of capital is aimed towards capital accumulation. In other words, capitalist expansion heavily depends upon state support, both legitimate and illegitimate. This increasing power of the capitalist class has also shrunk the relative autonomy of the state and weakened its institutions. The state serves the interests of the ruling class in order to maintain its domination (Mandel, 1969).

Erosion of labour laws

In order to revive industries after the lockdown, several states have proposed amendments in the existing labour laws. Over ten states are in favour of extending the maximum working hours from eight to 12 hours a day and 72 hours per week for the next three years. Other changes are in the form of exemption from labour laws (UP, MP, and Gujarat), increase in the threshold for applicability of laws (Tripura), and exemption from labour inspection (Goa, MP).

These instances of suspension or erosion of labour laws are not only an infringement upon the rights of workers but also unconstitutional and a violation of international labour standards. Although these are yet to receive the assent of the President, these anti-poor and anti-labour amendments are another striking example of brazen state apathy. Denuding workers of their rights to decent work and collectivisation are nothing but attempts towards disempowering and dehumanising the already dispossessed working class. The state-capital nexus has been misusing the pandemic as an opportunity to disempower labour vis-à-vis capital.

Besides being anti-welfare in nature, these proposed amendments are also gender-insensitive. For instance, the increased working hours are set to impose a gender penalty upon women workers, who are also engaged in social reproduction in the household before and after a twelve-hour workday. Women in the unorganised economy are more susceptible to exploitation,

retrenchment, and various forms of violence. Lack of enabling policies and support mechanisms also adversely affects various other sections of women such as the elderly, homeless, disabled, sex workers, and trans-women (Dasgupta & Mitra, 2020). Critical concerns of lost incomes, hunger, equitable access and protection need to be immediately addressed.

The evasive silence of the PM has been louder than his election campaigns. The mantra of 'atma-nirbharta' or self-reliance is another gimmick to divert the attention from the enormity of the ongoing and upcoming crises. The underlying message seems to be that the poor should fend for themselves and not expect assistance from the state. This leadership deficit has also engendered a massive trust deficit. The poor, rendered defenceless, are left without a country, and women without home and work. The invisibility of the latter ensures that they remain voiceless and abandoned. Strong political resistance from the women belonging to the working class supported by civil society movements for upholding democracy and human rights are the need of the hour.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to take a toll on 25 million jobs worldwide, a majority of which are performed by women migrant workers in the informal economy (UN Women, 2020). This paper argues that the predicament of female labour migrants has not garnered the attention it deserved. That a majority of them are not documented in official statistics not only obscures their contribution to output but also denies them their rights as workers. As informal sector workers, they are not entitled to social insurance in any form such as maternity benefits, death and disability insurance or old-age pensions. The state must take active steps to extend protection to all informal workers during these times of acute distress and uncertainty.

As the pandemic intensifies with each passing day, uncertainties abound. Is this reverse migration a temporary or permanent phenomenon? Do the returnees have a future at their home that hardly has anything to offer? With the threats of retrenchment, informalisation, casualisation, and wage repression looming large, will those who return to the cities succumb to various forms of neo-bondage? Will they have any safeguarding mechanisms or bargaining power in the changed circumstances?

The concerns of female labour migrants are situated in paradoxical contexts. On the one hand, domestic workers have lost their only means of livelihood due to the restrictions placed on their entry into society premises. On the other, several migrant workers in precarious employment are not being allowed to return home and forced to work in unsafe conditions, against the principles of decent work. All the state has promised to ease the lives of the disabled is an ex-gratia payment of ₹1,000 over three months, for the one million or so beneficiaries of the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (Muralidharan, 2020). The 2011 Census estimates their population to be around 2.68 crores. Thus, not only does the scheme have limited coverage but also the assistance is grossly inadequate.

Migration is not only a male problem. Migrants have become visible during the pandemic, but neither the women walking alongside nor those trapped in various forms of semi- and neo-bondage. The fact that sanitary napkins were included in essential supplies only by March 30, 2020, nearly a week into the lockdown, is testimony to the laggard state response towards the specific needs of women. The state has dismally failed in all respects of securing the rights and well-being of all its citizens. Instead of upholding social justice and democracy and functioning as a welfare state, it is eroding labour laws to undo all kinds of protections that labour can enjoy against the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism.

The obsession of media houses with the 'viral' has deviated them from their task of bringing ground realities to the light. They are responsible for propagating androcentric narratives and discourses surrounding migration. Further, by not questioning the state, they have failed as the fourth estate of democracy. It is the collective apathy of the state, employers and civil society which has resulted in the pathetic conditions of women migrant workers. The corporate-media-state nexus is an unholy trinity exploiting the powerless for their gains.

Women have been historically marginalised and discriminated against based on gender, caste, race, and many other intersectional identities. The pandemic has laid bare the structural inequalities and pushed them further away from the mainstream to the margins. The pandemic has necessitated adequate representation of women in social dialogue for framing and implementing gender-responsive macroeconomic policies. A democracy cannot thrive unless it strives for gender equality in every sphere. It is time for women to reclaim their rights and get their due.

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The GRFDT works as an academic and policy think tank by engaging national and international experts from academics, practitioners and policy makers in a broad range of areas such as migration policies, transnational linkages of development, human rights, culture, gender to mention a few. In the changing global environment of academic research and policy making, the role of GRFDT will be of immense help to the various stakeholders. Many developing countries cannot afford to miss the opportunity to harness the knowledge revolution of the present era. The engagement of diaspora with various platform need to be reassessed in the present context to engagethem in the best possible manner for the development human societies by providing policy in-put at the national and global context.