5 The ‘new normal’

Making sense of women migrants’ encounter with COVID-19 in India

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Introduction

The COVID-19 context

This pandemic is deeply hurting the economic interests and well-being of our nation’s middle class, lower-middle class, and poor segments. In such a time of crisis, I request the business world and high-income segments of society to as much as possible, look after the economic interests of all the people who provide them services.¹

These words by the prime minister in the run-up to the lockdown as a first step towards dealing with COVID-19 raised many hopes. This was despite the fact that COVID-19 effectively descended on India with a deafening silence, ushered in by a stringent lockdown imposed at barely four hours’ notice towards the end of March 2020. However, the quiet was soon shattered by a growing demand by migrant workers for food, shelter, and transport. The most powerful images were of women and men with headloads, without footwear and bleeding feet, and a woman dead on a platform with a child trying to wake her. These visuals briefly turned the gaze on to a hitherto unrecognised reality: the existence of millions of internal migrants – homeless, invisible, and unrecognised, on whose intense labour the story of India’s double-digit growth has for long been written.

The presence of the absence: Official response to migrant women’s needs

The Government of India (henceforth GOI) started to respond to the migrant crisis with executive decisions which were, not surprisingly, insensitive to gender needs. Starting 27 March 2020, several orders were issued by the

GOI to curb movement of migrants who, faced with loss of work and no income to meet their daily food requirements, had no option but to throng to railway stations and bus stands or hit the highways, in an effort to return to their homes/source areas. GOI, meanwhile, called on States and Union Territories to take ‘strict measures’ to prevent the exodus, laying stress on the need to ‘*prevent any disruption to law and order*’ (GOI, 2020, emphasis added). In the meantime, under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) food and minimal cash were offered to convince the migrant workers and homeless people to stay where they were. Purportedly aired over the public address system, the orders went unheeded, as hundreds of thousands of migrants, including women who, dependent on daily earnings for immediate survival needs, set out on foot, laying bare the unpreparedness of the state to handle the crisis. On 29 March 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI issued an order that this movement of large number of migrants in some parts of the country was a violation of the lockdown measures on maintaining social distancing. States were again directed to ensure adequate arrangements for food and shelter, ‘to mitigate the economic hardship of the migrant workers’, while also proclaiming that ‘all the employers ... shall make payments of wages at their workplace on the due date, without any deduction, for the period of closure during the lockdown’. Landlords too were directed not to ‘demand payment of rent for a period of one month’, with forceful vacation of rented accommodation or hostel premises being liable for action under the Disaster Management Act (GOI, 2020a). A quick read of the orders issued indicates that there was no recognition of specific needs or gendered vulnerabilities.

Official responses, even as they referred to ‘stranded migrants’, remained frozen in the frame of maintaining ‘law and order’. These failed to accord dignity to men and women, whose hard labour had significantly contributed to the profits of the corporate world. The visible absence of women in the notifications pointed to a policy that did not address any women’s specific needs, leave alone take cognizance of their rights. The contrast was there for all to see: stay at home orders flying in the face with thousands of migrants out on the streets; starvation, disease, and death stalked them on their homeward journeys, even as deaths due to COVID-19 continued to increase.

This chapter contextualises recent developments within the longer histories of issues concerning gendered migration (Centre for Women’s Development Studies, 2012; Sansristi [Hans and Patel], 2006-2007, Patel and Hans, 2017). It pulls together selections from available evidence to argue that the marginalisation of women in the discourse on migration effectively aims at the denial of dignity and human rights to migrant workers, while it simultaneously reinforces gender norms and stereotypes. The obliteration from public view of the experiences of migrant women workers – be they

brick-kiln or sugarcane workers in rural and peri-urban India; garment or domestic workers in urban locations – allows for evading difficult questions with regard to narratives of the neoliberal paradigm. Narratives of migrant women's lives, captured in studies, point to precarity and increasing vulnerabilities, with food and livelihood security emerging as critical in the face of colossal job and income losses. True, individual stories of women's and young girls' courage and resilience continue to be highlighted by some media. Moreover, reports clearly point to the pandemic having exacerbated inequalities and raised the level of vulnerabilities. The accumulation of uncertainties and insecurities in the lives of women, combined with a visible loss of work, portend increasing violence in lives steeped in the volatility of contemporary times. Rather, emerging trends underline how the convergence of poverty, gender, and marginalisation has played out during the pandemic, to render women, and specific categories amongst them, especially vulnerable.

Central to the chapter is a concern that the discourse on migration remains affixed to a gendered narrative with women migrants remaining largely unrecognised or, at best, selectively 'visibilised'. To compel policy to be more accountable to feminist concerns, there is, at the same time, a need to critically examine the new vocabulary that has emerged with the outbreak of the pandemic. How does this advance an agenda wherein the nation's needs and interests are spelt out in dissonance with the everyday needs of women, putting at risk their right to a life with dignity? What are the losses labouring people, especially women, are likely to suffer with the enforcement of this 'new normal', which snuffs out channels for articulation of dissent while it condemns the working poor to a life of precarity through hastily adopted Labour Codes in pandemic times under the garb of 'labour reforms', in the name of simplifying the labour regulatory regime?

There has been a deep link between disasters, economics, and politics, but literature on this aspect is missing (Racioppi, 2016). Women in search of incomes and livelihood, facing enormous challenges in the labour market as a result of declining opportunities for work, are likely to be doubly affected. Their daily struggle to feed their families saw no end in sight. Meanwhile, with domestic workers 'locked out', their contribution to city life became visible all of a sudden, their presence often taking on a political hue, with claims being made to success in handling the pandemic. The visible lack of political will to address the governance challenges turned the health pandemic into a deep human tragedy, whose depth may not be fathomed for long years to come. The failure of the state to recognise and address the humanitarian crisis ushered in by the sudden lockdown virtually mocked at the misery of migrants and their families. The visibly stark

indifference of the ‘strong state’ to the suffering of the masses may perhaps be the most significant learning from this pandemic.

The context and contours of women’s migration

While migration has a long history, India has seen a huge increase in its scale since the adoption of neoliberal policies. This has its roots in agrarian distress, which has visibly deepened since the 1990s (Krishnaraj, 2006, Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2004). The lack of employment opportunities for both men and women, but more so for women, posed serious survival issues, with a growing number exiting from rural India in search of employment, often having incurred huge debts. Marked by varied short and long-term circulatory patterns, these defy classification as per usual typologies. Drawing attention to the fact that migrants fall through the cracks in the maze of clauses and conditionalities, scholars and activists have regularly pointed to the need to extend coverage of social security benefits to migrants along with portability of rights to enable them to avail of these (Srivastava, 2020). Identifying women and their specific needs within the histories and experiences of migration poses both conceptual and methodological challenges. Firstly, a mono-causal approach to data collection typically presents women’s migration as being linked to reasons of marriage, despite evidence that while

some implicit or actual labour migration by women may appear in the data as marriage migration or as other forms of associational movement by women simply because both may coincide, but the social reason is presumed to be all important. Even where women of a migrant family enter the paid or income earning workforce in their individual capacity at any given destination, it is still possible that marriage or family movement would be given as the reason for migration since the social (marriage and family) and economic (employment, business, etc.) reasons for migration are often congruent to the point of intersection in the case of women

(Agnihotri et al., 2012: 18)

This bias persists despite the fact that

the rising numbers and proportions of women migrating for work are no less striking. Census figures showed a spurt in female migration for employment and business from around 41 hundred thousand (lakhs) in 2001 to 85 hundred thousand (lakhs) in 2011, and an increased female share of such migrants from 12% to 16%. Census data also showed a shift in the pattern of female labour migration from predominantly

rural destinations to a distinctive tilt toward suburban destinations. Forty-seven percent of all women migrating for work/business were in urban areas in 2001.

(Mazumdar and Neetha, 2020: 26)

Gender work and the sexual division of labour

I am aware of the problems you have faced – some for food, some for movement from place to place ... However for the sake of your country, you are fulfilling your duties.²

This statement needs to be read alongside the official data on women workers, most of whom fall in the unorganised sector. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 400 million informal sector workers are at the risk of abject poverty in India, as a result of COVID-19 (ILO, 2020). It is well known that approximately 94 per cent of women workers are in the informal sector. The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018–2019 estimates demonstrated the enormous gap between the male and female labour force participation rate (LFPR) and in the male/female work participation ratio (WPR) (GOI, MOSPI, 2019: 4).³

Alongside falling WPR, categories to measure work underestimate the contribution of women to the economy. The lack of recognition of women's contribution in the rural economy is accompanied by the disguised nature of women's employment in the brick kilns; in sugarcane cutting in Western India, and in domestic work, all sectors which have seen a significant increase in women's migration over the last decade and more. This stems from women's migration and their labour being perceived as part of a 'family' unit, both with regard to migration and the labour recruitment process. Despite increasing numbers, given the prevalent gender biases there is no recognition of their migration histories nor of their 'work', leave aside realisation of the need for gender sensitive regulatory frameworks in the specific sectors where women workers are concentrated.

The last two decades have seen an overall decline in female employment, especially in rural India and an increase in women's migration to urban areas. Women domestic workers have, in the meantime, seen an increase, with the supply of workers being maintained through a regular flow of distress migration. This work continues to be marked by informality, the absence of formal contracts, low wages, and poor bargaining conditions. An inherent flexibility tilted towards performing additional domestic work overlaps with stereotypes of gendered work and the sexual division of labour. At the same time the work remains embedded within the inequalities of caste and class, with the share of domestic workers coming from other

backward classes, scheduled castes, and upper castes represented in that order (Neetha, 2019: 2–7).

Evidence collected by surveys and studies undertaken during and after the lockdown, highlights the fact that the pandemic has disproportionately affected migrant women, depriving them of opportunities to work with poor access to the schemes/welfare measures announced. A survey by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) of over 1,700 domestic workers across 11 states found that at a disaggregated level, more than half had lost their jobs, the extent being dependent on the spread of the pandemic. Nearly 87 per cent families were without a mode of livelihood (AIDWA, 2020b: 10). Data from another survey demonstrated that during the lockdown, migrant women reported huge work loss: construction workers being the worst hit (97 per cent), home workers (91 per cent) and waste pickers (86 per cent) (ISST, 2020: Table 3).

The impact on domestic workers has to also take into account the different layers of unacknowledged burdens, as for instance, when they became sole earners with husbands having lost their jobs, the paranoia around the pandemic put them under unusual stress and also increased their domestic responsibilities (AIDWA, 2020b: 10). Care burdens during the pandemic has had a multiplier effect. Besides care of children, the elderly, and dependents with disabilities in the family, there is the added burden of family members affected by COVID-19. The pre-pandemic imbalance in gender distribution also saw an increase in unpaid work within the household. Women's care economy also affected the LFPR but without women's contribution to care work the economy would slide further.

During the pandemic the vulnerability to intersecting deprivations became more visible, with access to food and housing emerging as critical needs. Unable to access income/earnings, women and families with no other resources or assets had neither the means of survival nor any savings to counter the pandemic. Located at the intersection of social and economic inequalities, women continue to face gendered impediments to exploring their chances of securing work at all, leave alone on better terms even in regular times. Further, during the lockdown when 'paid domestic "help"' was unavailable, upper-class women were easily pushed back into gendered domesticity, proving the inadequacy of paid domestic services as a solution to mundane, back-breaking household work' (John, 2020: 44–45). The pandemic exposed the faultlines in solidarities sought to be built along gender lines as also the persistence of intersectionalities across gender, caste, and class. Pre-existing inequalities along gender and caste lines are likely to get reinforced, unless the specific contours of disadvantage are recognised and addressed. In situations of severe economic shock in such contexts, women's loss of even their limited assets and indebtedness is common, as they

have limited resources and little or no savings to tide over a crisis. During the pandemic women reported having to sell these limited assets, including jewellery, to pay for family needs, or to arrange for stranded husbands to catch Shramik trains or buses home (Thomas and Jayaram, 2020).

The absolute fragility of human lives – given the absence of a policy which prioritises social security for all citizens – is perhaps the single most important learning from the experience of the pandemic. The NREGA, enacted in 2005, has emerged as the pillar of hope in these months. It is imperative that steps be taken to put in place an Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme through appropriate legislative measures to address unemployment among men and women, including migrants, on a long-term basis. Also required is an administrative framework which recognises migrants' entitlements to their citizenship rights in both source and destination areas; non-surveillant regulatory measures to enable migrants to access welfare measures and schemes without making women more vulnerable; and portability of rights to address the present restrictions on access to entitlements in destination areas. The present conditionalities for benefits result in added levels of insecurity, which again have specific meaning in the lives of women. These policy interventions should be designed with a commitment to inclusion of women, especially from the marginalised social groups.

Health and food insecurity: Interlocked in a systemic exclusion

While the disease makes no distinction between people or genders, the fact is that the impact of the disease and strategies adopted to tackle it affect people in diverse ways, given the differential location, sustaining capacity, and health and financial status of the affected population. In the absence of universal health access and portage in social security systems, the pandemic hit everyone hard, with special problems being faced by migrants, of whom a large section were women. Faced with lack of money due to the sudden lockdown, thousands of migrants, women and children, were seen walking hundreds of miles to reach their homes. Babies were born on the roads, in auto-rickshaws at hospital gates, and in the Shramik trains. Deaths of mothers and new-born babies increased threefold (AIDWA, 2020a: 4). Although data on migrant women's morbidity and mortality is still not available, a study undertaken among informal workers in Delhi found that accessing transport was most difficult. This, in turn, constrained access to essential medicines and health services (ISST, 2020: Table 2). With priority being given to the pandemic, other medical services were put on hold, resulting in the lack of care for pregnant women.

Women migrant workers are known to face violence and physical injury, raising health concerns in their efforts to find work. Women in the sugarcane industry in recent years have been forced to undergo hysterectomy by contractors in collusion with the private health establishments to prevent loss of work hours due to menstruation. This has had a serious impact on the long-term health of the women as they developed issues of hormonal imbalance and mental health (Jadhav, 2019). During the pandemic this group of migrant women, with pre-existing health issues, were left out of the government schemes supposedly introduced to provide livelihood to returning migrant workers due to the COVID-19 lockdown (Kinjawadekar and Roy, 2020). Work under the MGNREGS is known to provide a survival strategy to women, even as the hard manual labour can affect their health. It is reported that with male migrants returning, women's work saw a decline (Sharma, 2020). The pandemic has, as Deshpande argues, exposed the many faultlines that lay beneath the surface which have implications for women's and children's health outcomes. In addition to being important in themselves, these have implications for women's ability to participate in paid work (Deshpande, 2020b).

For women migrants returning home, especially those pregnant, no health care services were provided. The first point of contact for the migrants on their return home were the frontline workers, specifically the ASHA and Anganwadi workers, 90 per cent of whom are women. They have been intrinsically engaged in public health outreach work during the pandemic, despite not being recognised as 'workers' and denied a regular wage. This lack of economic protection and utter disregard for female care work/workers should not be surprising in a system known for its apathy and lack of sensitivity.⁴ During the present health emergency and enforced lockdown the unavailability and increased costs of such essentials for women point to a health crisis in the making (Mendoza, 2020).

Violence against migrant women is common phenomena (Hans and Patel, 2006-2007); however, during COVID-19 no data on violence is available. Violence has broad parameters, be it physical, economic, or social. Since the beginning of the pandemic, a study revealed, a majority of households (80 per cent) were consuming less food (Kesar et al., 2020: 2). Another on migrants indicated that (60 per cent) faced severe shortages in food supplies of which construction workers and waste pickers faced the highest shortages in accessing food (ISST, 2020). Less than half the domestic workers accessed dry rations from the PDS shops, while the others, forced to buy from the open market, felt the impact of increasing prices, with no visible efforts made to regulate them. Not being able to buy/provide milk for children was a new low point of the poverty visible because of the pandemic. Banks not allowing women without Aadhar cards to withdraw their own

money – not a new issue – became life threatening for women at this time (Centre for Equity Studies et al., 2020: 40).

The health sector saw no clear response or strategy to fight the virus during the lockdown. The funds sanctioned were less than 0.4 per cent of the GDP (Ghosh, 2020: 6). Despite a provision for cash transfers for maternal health and institutional deliveries under the National Health Mission (NHM), the conditionalities for availing of schemes and the lack of portability, posed serious limitations with few actual benefits reaching those who needed them.

The pandemic points to the critical need to usher in policy changes to strengthen the public health care system through budgetary allocations, with special provision for women's health needs. Social security measures incorporating gender concerns in health are required. In the absence of these, the 'new normal' sought to be created in the pandemic is heavily slanted against the vast majority of women, the poor, and migrants. It is imperative that policy discussions be made more gender sensitive to include the concerns of a critical mass who in all likelihood will be made to bear the social costs of the crisis.

Conclusion: The pandemic, security, and women migrants

Addressing the UN on 2 October 2020, the Indian Minister for Women and Child Development proclaimed that India had taken several measures to ensure the 'safety, security, and well-being of women during the corona virus pandemic and continuity of care of women especially pregnant, lactating and women in vulnerable situations to build a just and equal world for women and daughters in the post COVID situation' (Deshmukh, 2020). We have documented above that workers and migrants, without food or money to pay rents, required immediate relief, but the announcements by the GOI were a minimal financial support in Prime Minister Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) accounts (Rs. 500) and free/subsidised ration to needy families (GOI Ministry of Finance, 2020). There has been parsimony of relief measures, despite declaration of inflated official packages (Deshpande, 2020a: 14–15, Ghosh, 2020: 4). Many migrants who did not have Aadhar (identity) cards could not access the relief.

There was also violation of GOI's 29 March 2020 order which stipulated that employers make payment of wages of their workers, at the workplace on the due date without any deduction for the period they are under closure during the lockdown (GOI, 2020a). Construction workers, including women, did not benefit from the above orders, given the ambiguity about who their 'employer' was. Despite substantial evidence, it is not officially recognised that the majority of workers in India in the organised sector are

effectively informal workers with no social security benefits. Recruited through contractors, the names of a majority go unrecorded in muster rolls – allowing for the evasion of licensing procedures and denial of entitlements to social security benefits as per law. Women construction workers, living in shanties with no access to their rights to crèches, toilets, and disparity in wages and faced with a high risk of injuries, reported both widespread loss of paid work and failure to access relief announced by the Construction Workers' Welfare Board in Delhi (ISST, 2020). With the economy collapsing, the money could only have come from the government but even the Labour Departments across the country remained silent spectators to the misery of thousands of women migrant workers and their dependents exposed to suffering from 'invisible poverty' – a term which would need redefining.

Security has not been an important indicator in migrant women's protection. Analyses of migrant women's security does not imply only physical but requires our probing deep into the reactions and contradictions of the term 'security' itself. In this chapter we shift the word 'security' to 'human security', as it broadens the definition of the term. Reardon argues that human security can be achieved only when understood in equivalence with gender equality (Reardon, 2019: 7). We argue it can be used in the in the case of migrant women who face tremendous violence in different forms. We agree that our thinking of security must be transformed, and viewed in relation to women's daily lives and 'gender particularities'. The framework we propose seeks answers to women migrants' perception of security. What has been the role of the state in protecting them, whether in place of destination or at home? The human security framework⁵ in the context of this chapter includes, very simply, fulfilment of the basic needs, physical security, and dignity.

Overall, this chapter brings together snippets from a rich repertoire of studies conducted under difficult circumstances during the pandemic by civil society organisations and young researchers, who struggled to generate a body of knowledge which shall allow for deeper analysis in post-pandemic times. Clearly, two issues surface in readings of these reports: food and income loss. It was not surprising that more than the pandemic itself, the fear of starvation was a major cause of stress to women since providing food is primarily seen as their responsibility. Anticipating this, women's organisations had from the start pushed for free distribution of rations and cash disbursement (AIDWA, 2020a).

COVID-19 highlights the significance of an interdisciplinary, inter-sectoral, and trans-sectional approach to understanding discrimination against women across multiple sites, in the context of neoliberal policies in India, where the state and government collude to deny women, workers, and citizens the right to equality and human dignity. Among the issues that surfaced during the

pandemic, food and livelihood security emerged as critical for social development in the years to come. These also have very specific meanings in the lives of women with regard to their assigned roles in society, their aspiration for equality and a life with dignity and their special vulnerabilities. There are clear indications that the pandemic is likely to be used as a pretext to impose further constraints on democracy, given the inclination to meet the expectations of corporate capital. The stifling of free debate has resonance in the homes, for those who justify checks on democracy in the public sphere seek to also push back efforts to democratise the home/domestic environment. India is already a witness to bizarre reactions to emerging issues of mental health and familial/marital discord. The emerging political narrative seeks to assert a homogeneity and erasure of diverse familial forms, cultures, and identities – to fit them into a narrow sectarian hyper-nationalist frame. In such a context, discussions on domestic violence and autonomy are likely to be brushed aside, even as the shadow of violence which looms over the lives of women across different stages of their life cycle acquires new, deeper meanings. Violence in the lives of women, especially those from Dalit, minority, and tribal groups, remains entrenched and intertwined with structural inequalities. These constitute the social world in which women struggle to survive, confronting specifically gendered forms of oppressions. The vocabulary and architecture of strategies to deal with the pandemic signal the reinforcing of multiple exclusions, discriminations, and vulnerabilities. What meaning these will hold for women in an overall climate of heightened insecurities is a field which throws up more questions than this chapter can answer.

Notes

- 1 Government of India, PIB, 2020.
- 2 Text of prime minister's address to the nation on 14 April 2020 released by Government of India PIB 2020.
- 3 LFPR is at 18.6 for female compared to 55.6 for male. This gap is also reflected in the WPR which is 52.3 for males in comparison to female WPR at 17.6 per cent.
- 4 For example, a public request had to be made in 2018 not to tax sanitary napkins.
- 5 The human security framework calls for human well-being and fulfilment of four basic conditions, a life-sustaining environment, the meeting of essential physical needs, respect for identity and dignity of persons and groups, and protection from avoidable harm and expectation of remedy for unavoidable harm (Reardon and Hans, 2019: 2).

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