Lives and sustenance of migrant Indian women in Indenture and COVID-19

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Abstract In the early nineteenth century, several indentured laborers and their descendants were exposed to political, social, and cultural shifts and instabilities that perpetuated over the decades. Simultaneously, in the pandemic era of COVID-19 and the colonial period, women workers had to overcome numerous hurdles, as they migrated without proper sustenance. The main objective of this study was to examine the working conditions, physical and psychological conditions, and sustenance of contracted laborers, especially migrant women, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them are inequality in the labor markets, domestic workloads and workspaces, sexual abuse, mobility crises, child abuse, xenophobic attitudes, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). By adopting a qualitative approach and critical examination, it is observed that the vulnerabilities of low-skilled women, the exploitation of migrant labor, as a matrix of identities, behaviors and power relationships are discernible in capitalist expansion, and the disparities that they induce while taking into account how the market mimics the prevalent sexual division of labor.

Keywords: slavery, cultural shift, british colonies, SGBV

1. Introduction

Migration is common to all living beings because of survival and social uplift (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022). “All living things are thought to engage in continuous migration”. Migration is classified into two main categories. They are internal migration as well as international migration (Fischer et al., 2021). Internal migration is defined as migration occurring within the country. International migration is defined as migration occurring outside the country, i.e., beyond the borders. Based on their mode of origin and terminus, immigrants are classified into four major types. The participants were rural–rural, urban–urban, rural–urban, or urban–rural. There are three main types of labor migration. They are circular, permanent and commuting (Terrazas & Blitchtein, 2022).

The term ‘Girmit’ is associated with slavery and indentured labor or servitude (Kataoka, 2022). It is a synonym of the word “agreement”. It is derived from the bonded labor agreement of the British colony with the Indian laborers. Currently, the term has become related to embarrassment and disgrace. The inclusion of women labor migrants was one of the most notable points throughout the British colonial period’s labor migration (Ganguly, 2021). It has been evident that the women of Asian countries were being carried out as slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. Notably, women are subjected to transoceanic migration to Fiji and Mauritius (Akbar, 2022).

In 1829, the abolition of the Satî Act eradicated the sati and gave freedom to Indian women to construct their own lives (Salangi, 2022); however, the application of the masculine Shastric Law of Hindus replaced dangerous customs and provided some fundamental rights to women and restricted women to Brahmanical norms (Sarkar, 2021). Such women are compelled to move or exit the nation as an outcome of disturbances and masculine boundaries of both controlling and ill-treating. A dependent, wife or single female who migrated to another nation was characterized as a timid, unskilled and prostitute.

The pandemic has affected the psychological condition of people, especially migrant women (Azeez et al., 2021). The loss of jobs and livelihoods has affected not only women laborers but also their families, to whom they depend for their economic lifeline. This type of reverse migration results in a domino effect affecting not only families but also the GDP of the entire nation.

Colonialism disrupts people’s sense of place or home in several ways (Kukkakorpi & Pantti, 2021). For any human being, a place denotes a sense of belonging and possession; it is deeply rooted and embedded in one’s culture, language, identity, class, and history. Dislocating a human being from his legacies or native land is similar to caging in a no man’s land.

The first case of the coronavirus in India was detected on January 30, 2020 (Andrews et al., 2020). Due to its contagious nature, lack of treatment and restricted healthcare facilities, the Indian government has been able to execute nationwide lockdowns. This factor helps to minimize the spread of diseases even though the nation faces economic crises in businesses, industries and people in several societal strata. This affects the lower division of society, mainly migrant workers.
The World Bank reports that the loss of jobs, lockdowns and social distancing were intended to lead to a painful process of returning to mass migrant populations in India and many other nations (Yadav & Priya, 2021). These impacts adversely affect them and further dehumanize them. They walk hundreds of kilometers to reach one’s hometown (Das & Kumar, 2020).

The main objective of this review paper is to analyze the working conditions, physical and psychological conditions, and sustenance of indentured labor, with special reference to migrant women in the era of COVID-19. A comparative analysis of bonded migrant women’s labor in the 19th century and in the COVID-19 situation is discussed in the paper. Additionally, the policy for migrant workers and the journeys of indentured laborers are analyzed.

2. Research Method

The present study performed a qualitative analysis to investigate the working conditions, physical and psychological conditions and sustenance of migrant women in the COVID-19 pandemic era. The qualitative approach is regarded as a multiapproach that involves naturalistic and interpretative approaches (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Comparative analysis was performed for the evaluation of bonded migrant women laborers from the nineteenth century and during the COVID-19 period with respect to home and existentiality. Gendered experiences of COVID-19 were triggered by successive lockdowns. Inequality in labor markets, domestic and workplace workloads, sexual abuse, domestic labor, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), a crisis of mobility, xenophobic attitudes, and child abuse are the major areas that need utmost attention (Bondarenko, 2022). According to US Bureau of Labor statistics, 2.5 million women left the job, while 1.8 million men and twice the number of women experienced mental illness, compared to only 10% of men (Daniel et al., 2022). Visual ethnographic studies are performed with the help of social media, television, and interviews.

3. Status of Migrant Women Workers during Colonial Times

The indentured laborers were trying to escape from poverty and famine, which frequently occurred during the period of British rule in India. This gave rise to social issues such as illiteracy, and few of the workers knew only about thumbprinting instead of signing in the agreement. Several laborers are unaware of their wages and departure locations. Some of the workers were recruited from rural India to work in cities such as Kolkata, but they persuaded them to agree on contracts for overseas plantations.

There was considerable migration of people due to colonial demand for workers in the sectors of mines, agriculture, construction and armed forces. The rural–urban movement of people in the postcolonial era was due to inequalities, which in turn promoted capitalist growth in India. Inequality became significant in the post-eration stage, worsening the gap between urban and rural areas. Therefore, growth occurs around urban centers, specifically in the northern, southern and western parts of the country (Srivastava, 2020). The development of urban centers and loss of livelihood in rural areas caused people in rural areas to migrate toward developed urban centers. These are the major factors that are responsible for rural–urban migration.

Apart from the bonded labor process, the colonizers proposed the maistry and kangani contractual labor process. These were introduced mainly by headman or middleman. They pulled down people who were in financial crisis even if they belonged to their own religion, caste, village, or community. They recruited Indian people to colonies. To prevent the process of legitimizing, they were assisted with the upfront payment. Almost 1.71 million Indian people were moved to Malaysia and Singapore as indentured laborers (Sebastian & Kumar, 2020). Approximately 1 million Indian people moved to Ceylon between 1840 and 1942 (Pandey, 2023). The localities of Tamil Nadu and former Madras Presidency were involved in the catchment basin for worker recruitment by Kangani and Maistry (Teweldebrhan et al., 2020).

The marriage system also affects the indenture labor system and varies drastically. In the ancient period, marriages were arranged within a restricted closed circle bounded by specific conventions for both Hindus and Muslim religions. Approximately 40 percent of females migrated to the colonies during the Girmitiya migration, following their husbands overseas. This situation could not be prolonged due to the scarcity of Girmitiya women in Fiji. This results in an imbalance of men and women in the indenture labor system (Joji, 2022). This leads to intercaste and cross-caste marriages. The colonial law opposes Hindu and Muslim marriages and is termed not to call it legitimate (Raghunathan, 2022). This exacerbates the situation and complicates the marriage system. Women were abused as an outcome of this imbalance. There is a situation in which enslave men agree with their wives to perform sexual acts with the other group of people for reasons of payment. Some fathers sell their daughters to overcome poverty and economic crises. Despite the marriages and evolution of families, the plantation system has damaged the stability of the domestic life of migrant people. At times of crisis, it is impossible to maintain the worth of family and its soothing effect on society. Even though migrant women face the challenge of ignorance, they believe that their family is important and that their offspring provide support to them.

In the bonded labor system, women occupy a peripheral position with respect to gender relations. The male counterparts, as well as other associated relationships, are responsible for termination, suicides and infanticide. Sexual abuse and molestation of migrant women led to the abandonment of the indentured system in Fiji (Calabrò et al., 2022).

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There were many incidents evident in the bonded labor system. One such incident involved the use of a 21-year-old migrant woman called ‘Kunti’, which drew attention from both India and Fiji. In 1908, Kunti moved from India to Fiji through a bonded labor system. Her native plant was Lakhanpur village located in Gorakhpur. Her family was assigned to work on the sugarcane plantations. Kunti worked in the isolated banana area in 1913. When the supervisor approached her and tried to rape her, she fought against him and fled into the river to safeguard herself. Kunti with anxiety rushed into the river but were saved by young people who belonged to the Indo-Fiji category. The tale of Kunti drew significant attention in India and was published in Indian newspapers such as Bharat Mitra (Basu, 2020).

Migrant women are considered to be less productive in the earlier stages of migration. They were often exploited and abused, but they are more stable and resolute as well as independent. These plants are impacted by sociocultural and economic factors. In the absence of several conventional laws, these communities become more efficient and powerful. Specific female workers were promoted to the ‘Sirdani’ category, which is referred to as the ‘female supervisor’.

Law enactment, labor commodification and market society formation resulted in the shifting of the family and social landscapes of Indian people. Dowry practice plays a key role in the property law proposed by the British colonial government. They collected enormous taxes on property. Prior to the implementation of colonial laws on taxes, the dowry took the shape of immovable assets such as property, which are women’s own property and are referred to as stridhan (Dalmia & Lawrence, 2005). This concept has changed over the years. Dowry transforms from immovable assets to movable assets such as gold.

The transition of an immovable property to movable capital allowed for the regulation of capital to transit easily from women’s father to her husband or father-in-law. Women do not have control over this capital. These conditions transform the gold as a part of their dowry, and this has followed over the years.

Therefore, in the colonial period, the indenture labor process caused women to migrate with men in neighborhood nations. They moved to stabilize the enslaved men, but later, they endure physical abuse and face several consequences mentally and physically.

4. Conditions of Migrant workers during the Pandemic

The Indian government proposed the “Janta curfew” for controlling the COVID-19 pandemic on 22nd March 2020 (Parray, 2021). Two days later, the government announced the lockdown of the country on 24th March 2020. Only four hours are needed for people to decide on issues related to lockdown (Kumar et al., 2022). The transit lines and transporters are controlled and stopped leaving behind the travelers. They do not have an idea where to move. Migrant women need to maintain a stable equilibrium among work and home throughout the epidemic. They are considered to be an inferior community in the labor market.

The Gender Division of Labor restricts the employment opportunities of migrant workers. It describes the world of work, where men and women usually enter different sectors or carry out different activities if working within the same sector. Women are frequently given lower-ranking jobs that entail chores that are culturally despised and receive little social acknowledgment. Migrant women working in the informal sector encounter barriers to sexual and reproductive health care and have little or no social protection. As a result, migrant women are less safeguarded from job loss and economic administration. The COVID-19 epidemic has taken a heavy toll on the Indian economy, and migrant workers have contributed substantially to remittances in the labor force. Women from Northeast India, including Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, who battled against all difficulties in leaving their villages and breaking into the industry, are now faced with not only the loss of livelihoods but also safe spaces away from their homes (Lusome & Bhagat, 2020). These patients were frequently described as ‘characterless’, ‘easygoing’, or even ‘chinki’. Among the migrant workforce, daily wagers were the worst hit by the closure. With the implementation of the lockdown, they not only were without work but were also irritated due to the termination of their daily revenue, upon which they survived. These migrants were detained in lockdown due to a shortage of food and other necessities (Gogoi & Nath, 2023). The backdrop of patriarchal hegemony is one of spatial subordination and oppression, with a strong emphasis on the body. The feminist critics examine how patriarchy’s power is distributed both spatially and chronologically. In order to demonstrate how space can function as a location of resistance by eroding gender normative limitations as well as a means of control, confinement, or limiting mobility, they examine the relationship between gender and mobility in both public and private settings (M. R. & Chaudhary, 2023).

Approximately 5% of the overall population of migrants received government-allotted rations, while 28% did not obtain rations even though they held ration cards (Bordoloi et al., 2020). Almost 91 percent of the migrants were either laid off or had their wages reduced (Shahare, 2020). During the pandemic, not all migrants were able to return to their native countries; thus, they were accommodated in relief camps. The conditions in these camps were dreadful; many lacked basic amenities such as fans and running water. The quarters were overcrowded and cramped. Even six to nine people had to fit into a small space that lacked ventilation and sufficient space for food preparation (Shahare, 2020). It was extremely difficult for female refugees to live in shelters with unknown males without appropriate food, and the unsanitary bathroom and surroundings rendered them exposed to various dangerous diseases. This situation was similar to that of the Girmiit migrant in the colonial era of the 19th and 20th centuries.
They were unable to follow any basic safety procedures, such as maintaining a safe distance from others, often washing their hands, using hand sanitizers, or wearing masks, because of the unfavorable conditions in aid camps. Inappropriately, these procedures were tremendously difficult to carry out in claustrophobic and inadequate camp accommodations, putting the crowd at serious risk of spreading the sickness. It is desirable to hear that none of the migrant workers be harmed during the pandemic era because women worry about being attacked when traveling to or from public locations (Sen, 2023).

The absence of official data on unemployment immediately following the lockdown blurred the true spectre and gravity of the unemployment crisis; however, data from credible private organizations such as CMIE helped in bridging this gap (wire 2021). A total of approximately 122 million rural and urban jobs were gone astray in April 2020. The job loss data match the GDP data recorded in the first quarter of the Financial Year of 2021. Secondary and tertiary industrial activities, operating mostly outside of urban areas, crashed, while agricultural activities continued to grow within a strong clip.

5. Policies for Migrant Workers: A Critical Overview

In terms of social security, the initial steps were taken during the French Revolution with the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Indian Supreme Court articulates that migrant workers’ demands must be met by federal and state governments. The provision of dry rations to migrant workers, the creation of communal kitchens, the execution of the ‘One Nation–One Ration Card’ system (Sunitha and Sudha, 2020) and the application of the Inter-State Migrant Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 (the ISMA) as a portion of its labor law reform plan, began the process of combining twenty-nine central labor laws into four primary labor codes in 2019. The codes were as follows: The Code on Wages, 2019; The Code on Social Security; The Code on Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions; and, finally, The Code on Industrial Relations, all of which were produced in 2020 (OSH Code) (Chirico et al., 2019). Specifically, according to the Ministry of Jobs and Labor (Rajan et al., 2020), the aim of this project was ‘to generate employment and to enhance ease of doing business’, indicating an emphasis on macroeconomic growth rather than worker welfare.

5.1. Code on Wages 2019

The Indian Constitution includes several labor-related legalizations, which include 45 central legalizations and 100 state legalizations for the welfare of employees (Jayaram, 2019).

The Wage Code is the initial step toward the enforcement, implementation and harmonization of the labor laws in the nation. The code addresses minimum wages and the payment of wages and the provision associated with bonuses (Raju et al., 2022).

The payment of the wages Act of 1936 is applicable to employees in both the organized and unorganized divisions. The code is applicable to all industries but limited to the sector where the employee wages reach up to INR 24,000. By utilizing the codes, the central government fixes wages for employees on railways, mines, etc. The state government fixes salaries for other sectors. It also includes the contractors where all workers, including migrant workers, need to receive minimum wages.

- The minimum wages Act 1936 provides a clear definition of employees and employers. An employee is defined as the person who is recruited for work, whether it may be skilled, unskilled or clerical.
- Payment of the Bonus Act, 1965 reveals that bonuses should be paid to workers with a minimum of 20% of their annual wages. All eligible laborers needed to be paid bonuses within 8 months for the closure of the accounting year.
- The remuneration Act, 1976 states that equal wages should be applicable to both women and men employees. This approach insisted on the prevention of gender discrepancies in terms of salary.

All the above laws are grouped into “The code on Wages 2019“. It is implemented for the sake of welfare. Migrant workers also benefit from this code if properly executed in the organization. In case the industry fails to implement, it will be penalized up to 1 lakh.

There are several limitations in the codes. It does not give clear definition of worker and employee. It includes both skilled and unskilled workers in the same category. The code does not allow inspection to be performed electronically. The code does not signify the law related to migrant workers.

5.2. Code on Social Security

The code on social security was established by the central government. It focuses on the size of establishments as well as infrastructure. It comprises unorganized labor, gig and platform workers. An unorganized worker is a self-employed individual within the home. Gig refers to beyond the conventional employer–employee relationship. Platform workers are people who are recruited through online platforms in organizations (Srivastava, 2020b). The code expands the definition of “employees”, which includes the worker employed via contractor. It also focuses on interstate migrants, as it expands the regulation to workers who self-employed from another state (Pillai & Dam, 2020). If the organization fails to execute the
“code of social security”, then it will be penalized to the fine up to Rs. 50,000- and one-year imprisonment. The law has had supplementary power during the pandemic era, as the central government can reduce the contributions of PF and ESI to emergency conditions by up to three months. The code has limitations. Initially, the code concentrated on interstate migrants but failed to focus on the other categories of migrants.

5.3. Code on Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions (OSHWC)

The OSHWC was proposed by the Ministry of State for Labor and Employment in Lok Sabha. The code insists on safety, health and welfare for employees. The code was implemented within an organization that comprises 10 or more laborers in various sectors, such as the trade, business, plantation and service sectors. It involves separate provisions for the license, duties and safety regulation of employees.

There will be penalties if the organization follows the codes. An employer in the industry will be penalized for two to five years if the death of an employee occurs due to improper regulation and safety measures. The penalty will reach 3 lakhs. In case, if an employee violates the code, the fine will reach 10,000 rupees (ten thousand).

The code has several significant advantages for the welfare of employees in organizations. An employer working in construction cannot recruit people with defective vision, giddiness, or deafness since there is a risk of accidents. The female workers are not required to stay beyond 7 P.M. until 6 A.M. This condition accords with the safety measures, working hours and holidays. These are the notable advantages of the OSHWC code (Lawbit, 2019).

There are several limitations in implementing the code. One major limitation is that the code refers to the word “wages” associated with the overtime and leave calculations. There are many other codes that describe various features of wages. However, the code does not provide a clear definition of wages. Another main challenge is that the policy is currently pending on the Lok Sabha waiting for its enactment.

5.4. Code on Industrial Relations

The industrial relation code assesses the framework for safeguarding employee rights to form unions. This approach minimizes the friction between employers and employees. It supports the organization in settling down disputes. It facilitates ease of doing business (Miyamura, 2021).

The objective of the code is to bring peace to industry by resolving disputes. It also provides cordial relationships among employers and laborers, which ultimately leads to the progress of the organization.

It concentrates on the categorization of workers, shift timing, attendance, and procedures for holidays. It helps employees voice up their complaints through strikes. The procedure for strikes is established through the code. These disputes can be handled by an industry tribunal that comprises two members. One type includes industrial and other administrative members. Fixed-term employment is introduced through this code, where the contract is agreed upon between the employer and the worker. According to the agreement, the employees were assigned to work for a fixed duration.

The code has certain limitations. Migrant female workers from other states and nations cannot benefit from gratuity and other benefits if they transit during a pandemic and do not return to industry due to unexpected circumstances.

All the above laws and codes focus on the welfare of employees who are working in the organization. The labor force will benefit if it is properly implemented and followed up appropriately. The government has taken necessary steps to safeguard employees. The employees also include migrant workers. All the laws apply to every citizen in India. It is obvious that migrant workers of both male and female age utilize the code for their economic uplift. However, notably, these laws are not strictly incorporated into the industrial sector, so the welfare of migrant workers is still questionable.

6. Challenges of Migrant Women in the Pandemic Era

Immigrants in major cities and states in India experienced widespread panic when the lockdown began, which led to steadfast attempts to return to rural hometowns. Every year, ten thousand migrant laborers from neighboring states flock to Delhi and Gurugram in search of better opportunities. Wages and prospective earnings in these areas are rather high. The outbreak of COVID-19, followed by the extraordinary lockdown, has severely harmed the livelihood of migrant laborers (Baas, 2020). Thus, the topic loss of livelihood and ensuing debt depicts the experience of women migrant workers who have lost all their economic prospects and are now in debt (Azeez et al., 2021).

Most of the women experienced feelings of loneliness and captivity as a result of lockdowns and movement limitations. Sudden changes in routines, such as transiting from employed to unemployed, have detrimental psychological and social impacts on women (Dubey et al., 2020). The significant challenge faced by women is accessing bathrooms. The public toilets of slums were overcrowded as an outcome of the closure (Agarwala & Kaur-Ghumaa, 2021). Access to open locations for use as restrooms is particularly problematic because of male monitoring, which was less common prior to the outbreak. While none of the participants had experienced violence during the epidemic, women were concerned about the possibility of assault on their journey to or from public places.
Three distinct types of female immigration are revealed by the studied phenomena (Khoo et al., 1984). (a) Migration of autonomous females: Many women from the middle and upper classes move to urban areas to pursue their education and look for work, ostensibly to advance their social status and position in the marriage market (Chatterjee & Desai, 2020). (b) Relay migration: Families in rural areas with some land holdings send their girls to work primarily as domestic slaves where they are safe in the care of a mistress (Al Rasheed, 2023). The eldest daughter is sent out first, and when each of the others marries off, she is replaced by the second, third, and so on. (C) Family migration: The wife migrates with her husband to the new area to look for employment, leaving the village behind. Journey ofIndentured and Labor Migrants

The sea voyage was lengthy and arduous, taking approximately 160 days to reach the Caribbean colonies. The British had no regard for the refugees' well-being, and they were placed into cargo ships that were not designed to transport passengers. Many of these women migrants had never left their little towns, never alone been to such faraway places. These conditions are particularly harsh for young children, and there is a significant mortality rate. Those who died on board of the ships were simply tossed out into the sea. The women migrants were also subjected to physical and sexual assault at the hands of the European ship captains, with no way out but to leap from the ship into the ocean. The migrants were referred to as 'crossing the Kalapani'. Indians were unfamiliar with the water, and the (cultural) link with sea voyages was that crossing the sea meant breaking away from ties to the country. They were considered derogatory and mean as they crossed the Kalapani and were away from Indian boundaries.

The term 'Bhaiya Express' is a contemporary moniker for passenger trains. The term refers to the number of trains, not just one, that carry workers to India's cities since many individuals are perched on roofs. These trains carried them to coastal depots during the colonial era, where they were sold abroad. Currently, trains transport refugees from towns such as Barwaripur, Semra, and Majhauwa to cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Surat, Kolkata, Punjab, and Assam.

7. Results and Discussions

The majority of migrant workers come from eastern Uttar Pradesh, including Basti, Azamgarh, Ghazipur, Sultanpur, Banda, Gorakhpur, Faizabad and Gonda, as well as Raxaul, Betia, Narkatiaganj, Motihari, Sugauni, Darbhanga, Chakia, Nirmali, Farbsiganj, Mahbubani, and Munger. At least 100 people assemble daily in the bus or train depot of these towns to travel to the closest rail hubs, which include Barauni, Allahabad, Katihar, Banaras, Buxar, Samastipur, Patna, Mokama, Ara, Sasaram, Chhapra, Siwan and Muzaffarpur. Several migrant workers are uninformed of the direction in which their destination moves on. Migrant employees are under the complete custody and 'protection' of contractors who beg, lure and loom them to work in factories in large cities. These contractors are the present-day resemblances of recruiters, otherwise arkatiyas of colonial times, who used to travel from village to village, luring hapless people into subdepots as well as depots, taking them to work as Girmityas in plantations overseas in Dutch colonies (Kumar, 2020).

Despite the fact that the indentured labor system had long since ceased, Indians were nevertheless subjected to bigotry. It was strengthened by the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. This led to the transfer of approximately 3,500,000 Indians to various British colonies outside of their own lands. Mahatma Gandhi was instrumental in preventing labor emigration. He addressed several letters and petitions through his men in Mauritius since he had traveled there and observed the condition of the enslaved servants. He was genuinely stimulated by their anguish as well as suffering (Jatav & Nair, 2022). Even the food provided was insufficient to satisfy their hungry stomachs since they were mercilessly coerced and tortured to labor for 14 to 18 hours. M.K. Gandhi offered a genuine depiction of the indentured or Girmitya system in his book "My Experiment with Truth and Pahala Girmitya." He was the one whose bravery and unwavering efforts brought an end to the dreadful indentured system.

Circular migration caused extreme stress, anxiety, despair, drug abuse and addiction, and self-harm among refugees as a result of the epidemic. Furthermore, they had greater concerns that deeply affected them, such as uncertainty about the duration of the lockdown, desperate longing to travel and meet their families, fear of being abandoned and deserted by their employers, insecurity about their job and income, and acute distress, which elevated from their inability to look after the health issues of children and pregnant women (Chander et al., 2021).

The phrase ‘modern slavery’ refers to the variety of exploitative behaviors, such as human trafficking, child labor, forced labor, and other slavery practices. The outbreak of COVID-19 highlights how economic and social inequalities render certain individuals more vulnerable to enslavement. Critical employees, particularly migrant employers and everyday wage laborers, are among those most affected by the epidemic. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, migratory workers were previously at risk of modern slavery due to their dependence on day-to-day wages, irregular position in the destination country and segregation from state economic and social support services. The broadcasters dubbed this the ‘Great Indian Migrant-Worker Exodus’. News sources revealed the terrible deaths of these migrant laborers on a seemingly interminable trek primarily on foot, spurred by starvation, joblessness, and destitution and the confidence that a home awaits them at the finish (Mini & Baishya, 2022). While much is made of how they died, their names and other facts about what they did for a livelihood are sometimes overlooked. As a result, a whole population of important service providers and employees is homogenized and rendered invisible. In regard to the visibility of their pain, migrant women laborers are clearly at the bottom of the food chain.
Migrant women workers as a group continue to exist in the glooms of dominating governmental and popular dissertations. It addresses the Pravasi Bharatiya, where transnational specialized migrant working women are invisible both overseas and from nonresident India.

While approximately eighty percent of domestic workers are employed in low- and middle-income nations, 79.2% of migratory domestic laborers are employed in high-income nations. The Pacific and Southeast Asia have the largest proportions of female refugee domestic laborers (24%), shadowed by Northern Europe, Western Europe and Southern Europe (22.1%), as does the Arab States (19%). The level of migration and destination varies according to the country of origin. For instance, 86 percent of women laborers from Sri Lanka work as domestic laborers in the Middle East. The feminization of domestic and caretakers produces a worldwide care network, which Arlie Hochschild defines as “a system of ties linking individuals all over the ecosphere based on the paid and unpaid activity of caring” (Krista & Raj, 2022). As the world’s population ages and as women's contribution to the labor market increases, claims for paid domestic and care services increase, and women who fulfill such roles rely on female relations to care for their own families, causing a chain reaction. Families of migrants, including female relatives such as mothers or oldest offspring, who take the role of unpaid domestic and caretaker, which in turn hinders their own capability to pursue economic and educational prospects.

8. Final Considerations

The COVID-19 health crisis has highlighted the need for female laborers to maintain the health and hospitality systems up to date, yet female migrant workers are mostly blamed for the spread of the virus. Their jobs were terminated during the pandemic for fear of contraction. Domestic labor is, in fact, the most prevalent occupation for females under the age of 16, but after being fired from such jobs, they are rendered helpless. By observing migrant women workers’ conditions in the colonial and pandemic eras, the vulnerabilities of Indian democracy are easily counted where they walk on foot for long days without any food. No significant transformation has been observed in their condition over the last three centuries until the present. Most of the indentured servitude people were from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh; the same is true even now, and most of the migrant workers come from these two states. This historical linkage, centuries of indentured servitude and slavery, nullifies the rise of the Indian economy and its GDP, where such ordinary citizens continue to be unprotected, disenfranchised, and shackled in colonial processes. Rather than encouraging men, employers and the government should play a larger role in providing domestic and care needs, the result of which would be more women joining the workforce and attracting even more women as paid caretakers.

India is one of the most populous postcolonial countries and is vulnerable to the migration of people from economically weaker sections of society. Women, migrants, laborers, and the ‘second/weaker sex’ are marginalized to the workforces. We should focus on unshackle migrant workers because of the historical inequalities of imperialism. The lives of ordinary citizens, such as migrant workers, will not be fulfilled until and unless India continues to be a franchise economy in the postcolonial period.

Ethical considerations

Not Applicable

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