

A Study of Unskilled Migrant Women Labourers in Hyderabad City with Special Reference to the Construction Sector

¹V. Preetam Surya, M. Phil, Regional Studies, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad,

²Dr. K. Anil Kumar, Assistant Professor, Discipline of Anthropology, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068, India.

Abstract

Migration of skilled and unskilled labourers in search of employment and for livelihood is a common observable fact today. The migration of labour is mostly dominated by men but there is significant increase in the women migrants due to demand for workers in construction industry. Most of the workers in construction industry are migrant workers. Construction workers are engaged in constructing huge industrial complexes, residential flats, roads, bridges and canals etc. The unskilled migrant labourers in the construction sector are one of the most vulnerable segments of the unorganized sector workers in India. These unskilled migrant labourers as a part of unorganized work force remain the most exploited ones even today.

In this backdrop, the present paper studies the socio-economic conditions and problems of unskilled migrant woman workers in construction sector. The study finds that not knowing much about the city, these people migrate in search of work and get exploited by the contractors. The living condition of the migrants at workplace is very poor. Even though they face so many difficulties in the workplace, they prefer to stay back, because of work opportunities. Apart from poor working conditions they also face health issues due to hazardous work and improper medical care, unequal distribution of work, low wages and sexual exploitation. An ethnographic research is carried for this study. The study was conducted at Hyderabad Central University construction work site. Both primary and secondary data was collected for this study. Anthropological tools and techniques were used in the study to collect primary data. The paper concludes that majority of the migrant labourers at workplace lack basic amenities, social security, women safety, and dissatisfied with their working conditions.

Keywords: unskilled, migration, woman, construction sector, wages working conditions, Hyderabad city

Introduction

Migration has been an integral part of the interaction of humans with their environment. The magnitude of migration in the globalized world and its repercussions for sending and receiving countries and communities received enormous attention when the Human Development Report, 2009 took up the theme of 'Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development'. Internal migration can be defined as "a population shift occurring within national or territorial boundaries, often characterized by persons seeking labour opportunities in more advantageous areas." While scholars agree that migration is an important route out of poverty, social scientists are still learning to what extent it actually helps in alleviating conditions of poverty. There are significant problems in defining and conceptualizing the issue of migration within India.

Several credible organisations have shed light on the reasons for distress migration and the poor working and living conditions of migrant labour that are further compounded by illegal contractual terms. According to IOM, "In the case of most intra-state and inter-state unskilled and semi-skilled migrants, migrant labourers run high risks of exploitation for they are exposed to large uncertainties and lack access to information and knowledge, thus making it very difficult for them to switch jobs in case of dissatisfaction with the current employer. Because of their option-less situation, these labourers lack bargaining power and thereby fail to negotiate reasonable pay scales and fair working conditions with the contractors. Apart from this, most migrant labourers have no access to ration cards; they lack

basic civic amenities; children's education gets affected and they are often excluded from community-based interventions."

Migration of skilled and unskilled labourers in search of employment and for livelihood is a common observable fact today. The migration of labour is mostly dominated by men and there is significant increase in the female migrants due to demand for workers in construction industry. Most of the workers in construction industry are migrant workers. Construction workers are engaged in constructing huge industrial complexes, residential flats, roads, bridges and canals etc. The unskilled migrant labourers in the construction sector are one of the most vulnerable segments of the unorganized sector workers in India. These labourers as a part of unorganized work force remain the most exploited ones even today. In this backdrop, the present paper studies the socio-economic condition and problems of unskilled migrant woman workers in construction sector.

Construction Industry and Hyderabad City

The construction industry is one of India's largest employers. Thousands of construction workers who have to build the new apartments and offices live in squalor in roadside tents that sit uneasily among the city's new glamour. They are migrants from the decimated agricultural sector; escaping from poverty and disease at home they are sucked into a labour economy that is characterized by exploitative labour practices, unsafe working environments, inhuman living conditions with little access to basic amenities and almost complete social exclusion. They have little or no work security and their income varies according to seasonal or other fluctuations in the demand for labour. Migrant workers move from project to project, labour camp to labour camp. There is no sense of a house or a room. Even within a camp, there is no specific place allocated since they work on shifts. All family members, including women and children, work on the construction site (<https://marcobulgarelli.com/migrant-workers-in-india/>).

A city is a chaotic maze of a cross pollination of experiences, a diverse space and a vibrant setting for the emergence of multi-layered identities. Saskia Sassen describes cities as "nerve centres" of globalization where the challenges associated with the globalization processes tend to converge. An article in the *New York Times* describes how "Indian government tried to discourage migration to cities by making city life unaffordable and unbearable for new arrivals" driven by a centrally planned, socialist approach to development. "But rural Indians have voted against these notions with their feet".

Rooted in a rich cultural past Hyderabad, the capital of undivided Andhra Pradesh, has steadily grown with time and expanded its outer limits to accommodate people, cultures and new traditions along the way. The IT revolution in the 1990s brought in its wake a boom in the infrastructural industries and real estate sectors. This resulted in a huge demand for labour and subsequently, there has been a steady stream of migrants into the city. The total number of migrants to the Hyderabad Urban Agglomeration has trebled from 3 to 9 lakhs during the period 1991-2001 (Iyer, Kulkarni and Raghavaswamy, 2007).

The literature suggests that it is predominantly poor people who migrate to large cities for work. They lack education and skills and tend to crowd in informal settlements in the peripheral limits of the city. Here their lives become embedded in a multi-cultural space and questions of identity acquire new meanings for them over time. For migrants who are trying to establish a foothold in a new social space, kinship and friendship ties have emerged as significant social institutions. This is also seen in Hyderabad in their mode of finding work at the 200+ *labouraddas*, major road junctions where migrant labourers gather in the morning to look for work. Risks associated with finding sustained work, low wage rates and exploitation (Sircar, 2004) points to the vulnerability of migrants and loopholes in the legal framework. Women and children of migrant families particularly face specific vulnerabilities in the city.

Anthropology of Migration

Migration is the movement of people from one locality to another. The study of migration has been and continues to be an important area of innovation in anthropological theory. It is an area of research which by its nature focuses on change and which has frequently challenged preconceived notions of society and culture. Anthropology is invested in studying this phenomenon primarily but not exclusively in its cultural and social dimensions. These studies focus on the way immigrants are perceived by the societies into which they enter as well as how they respond to these perceptions. Anthropology contributes to the study of contemporary migratory flows through its holistic approach,

which is able to tie together many different aspects of complex migration processes. The majority of anthropological work on migration benefits greatly from intensive collaboration with neighboring fields such as cultural studies, postcolonial studies, economics, history, political science, legal studies, sociology, and geography. Anthropological research on migration is nearly always interdisciplinary.

Historically, the study of human migrations was not a focus in anthropology until well into the 1950s. Before this time, anthropology focused largely on the study of small-scale localities. In early studies of migration to urban areas, American anthropologist Robert Redfield developed the ideas of Wirth and suggested the notion of a folk-urban continuum. He argued that the distinction between the city and the countryside corresponded to distinctions between the developed and the underdeveloped, the modern and the traditional. The migrants who move from the countryside to the city were, according to his analysis, progressive types, who through their move contributed to development and the breakdown of tradition. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, anthropology contributed to the study of migration by illuminating the implications of people's movements from rural, "non-developed" areas of the non-Western world to urban, industrialized centers in the West.

Important theories in the social sciences such as world-systems theory were used to map out large-scale processes that induced migratory patterns and to study how economic and political undercurrents affected individual people or small groups as they were swept up in the migratory steams of the mid-20th century. The 1980s and 1990s saw renewed interest among anthropologists in global migration, looking, for example, at the huge movements of workers from Asia to the Arab Gulf states. Much of this work was based on detailed analyses of the social and economic contexts that migrants, their families and communities operated in (see for example *Ballard, Marx and Mascarenhas-Keyes in Eades 1987*). This work challenged the economically determined and macro-models of migration in which individuals are 'pushed' and 'pulled' by the forces of capitalism. More recently there has been a greater interest in the cultural contexts of migration, examining the ideas and values around which migration is organized and the changes in these ideas and values that migration brings. *Katy Gardner's* in her book *Global Migrants, Local Lives* examines the cultural context and effects of the long-term migration from Bangladesh to Britain and the Middle East, She comments directly on recent theories of globalization, challenging notions of homogenization, which she argues are trendy substitute for modernization. Her analyses the very local responses to global processes and thus seeks to draw together macro and micro approaches to the study of migration (Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer; 2010).

Meillassoux's classic study of migration describes the way in which the indigenous domestic economy was maintained within the sphere of circulation of the capitalist mode of production in order to be exploited for commodities and particularly labour power. Similarly, the Comaroffs, working in those areas of Southern Africa where migration has become an inescapable feature of everyday life, have drawn out the complex historical and cultural mediations involved in people's understandings of the meaning of migration (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987).

In the 1990s, the cultural and social dimension of migration increasingly took precedence over the earlier, economic one. This change was induced by two larger undercurrents of research in the social sciences and humanities as a whole. First, the cultural dimension of late modern, industrialized societies came into much larger focus in the social sciences. Second, the rise of postcolonialism contributed to a more complex understanding of migration processes and their effect on people beyond the economic dimension.

Brettell and Hollifield 2008 focuses more specifically on the role of culture in a discussion of available works in migration research. A slightly more dated resource, Kearney 1986 is useful to understand the development in anthropological studies on migration up to the mid-1980s, while Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008 offers a variety of ethnographic studies on migration in Western Europe and North America. Foner 2005, a quantitative-cum-qualitative study, shows, from a perspective of immigration, the historical dimension of people coming to New York City. He also provides a very extensive overview and discussion of the literature on immigration from the perspective of many different immigrant groups as they arrived in this location.

Foner 2003 more generally introduces readers to the anthropological studies of immigration, both contemporary and historical. Rosenblum and Tichenor 2012 is a more general view of international migration, including but not limited to anthropological perspectives. A young generation of anthropologists and cultural critics began to investigate cultures as embedded in global flows and detached from the forces of markets and economics. This diversification inspired a variety of interests in studying the relationship between culture and human migrations.

Graciela S. Cabana and Jeffery J. Clark, as anthropologists pride on holistic approach to studying culture and society, past and present; explore the human condition from multiple perspectives using a variety of data sources. Migration is a fundamental part of being human. While movement is not exclusive to humans, we are unique from other species in the way we migrate and how we adapt to our new settings.

Human migration is not merely physical movement from point A to point B but also entails a complex swirl of biological, socio-cultural, and linguistic activities. Human migration, past and present, is important to what it is to be human. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, anthropologists used migrations as pivotal points in history, seeing various racial, cultural, and/or linguistic groups ebbing and flowing across the landscape. Heightened attention to migration issues has forced us to both reconsider and push the boundaries of anthropology beyond its focus on traditional societies. Past migrations have relevance in the modern world, but in an age when new transportation and communication technologies have exponentially increased interaction and inter-connectivity, we are forced to ask how they are relevant.

In this context, as anthropologists interested in migration, we want to know the answers to these questions: What are alternative ways of viewing and characterizing migration? Who moves, how do they move, and what motivates them? How does movement impact individuals and groups as well as their cultures and languages in both homeland and destination areas? How do these variables play out in the short and long term? Are there interesting aspects of human movement that have not yet been explored by anthropologists? These reviews conclude with implications for understanding human behavior and the social environment within the context of immigration and migration.

Methodology of the Study

This study is a part of my M.Phil thesis. The study was conducted in construction work site of Hyderabad Central University at Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana. Structured questionnaires were used in the study to understand the livelihood/occupational profile of migrants from various parts of India in Hyderabad. Secondary data collected from available literature and socio-economic survey reports which helped to understand the nature of migration and demographic status of the migrants.

In order to capture the extent of migration in Hyderabad and explore the conditions of the migrants in the city, qualitative methodologies were adopted to collate the data. Keeping in mind the qualitative nature of the study a cluster sampling method was adopted and covered nearly 30 households. Of these 30 households, 16 households comprise Telugu community people and the remaining 14 households consist of Hindi, Santali, Chhattisgarhi, Bengali and Odiya speaking people.

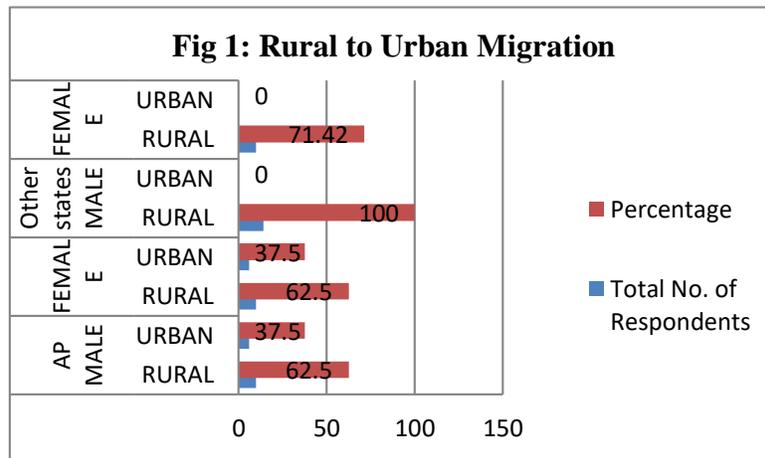
Anthropological tools and techniques were used to collect the ethnographic data. Fieldwork of one month was carried out in the month of July in 2011. It involved interviews with workers, contractors and employers and participant observation in construction sites.

Rural to Urban Migration

Employers prefer to hire migrant labour as they are considered to be cheaper and more docile than local labour. Consequently, labourers need to migrate in search of jobs, which they are denied in their native region. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of migration. Also, there often seems to be an inherent specialization among labourers according to their place of origin, resulting in region and task-specific movements.

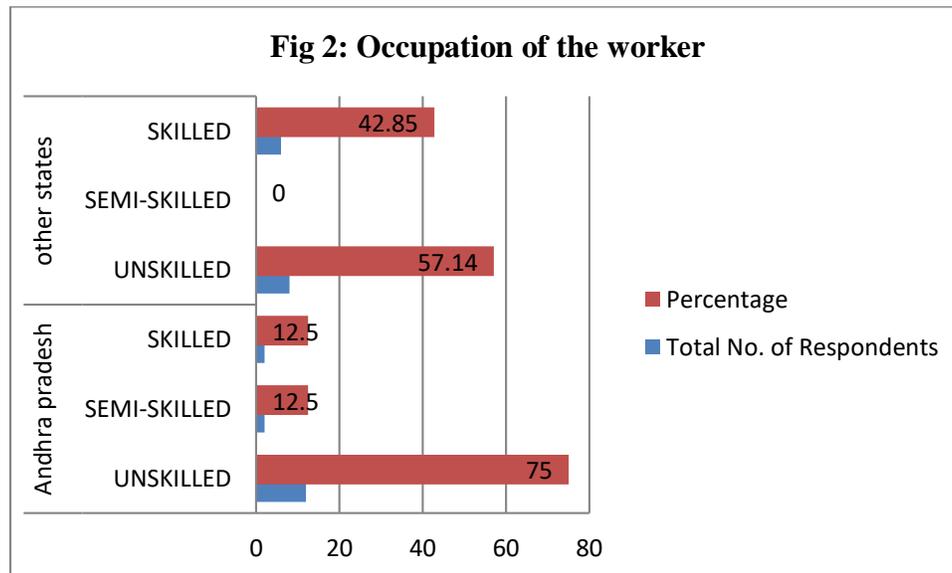
The Nagarjuna Construction Company is one of the reputed construction companies in India and has many branches all over India. It has assigned contractors to procure work force and these contractors move to different places. Old workers who are working in the company give some information to the mestris (contractors) about their friends/ relatives in their hometown who are in need of work. Most of the migrant

construction workers are rural to urban and very few move from *urban to urban* because they are in constant touch with their construction company for many years.



From the above table, taking the factor of place of last residence, 62.5% of Andhra Pradesh male and female migrants migrated from rural to urban and 37.5% of them migrated from urban to urban. From the other states, 100% of males migrated from rural-urban and only 71.42% females migrated from rural-urban. From the research sample, it appears that none of the female migrated from urban to urban.

Occupation of the Migrants



From the above graph, it is clear that out of 16 households of AP,

- 75 percent of the respondents are unskilled labour. Most of the Telugu-speaking people, especially males, are involved in the unskilled work, while the females are mainly involved in the household activities. This group includes males and females, who work in carrying the dust, bricks, cleaning and watering the building and all other manual work.
- 12.5% respondents are semi-skilled male labourers, who generally do work of defined routine nature, wherein the major requirement is not so much of the judgment or skill, but of proper discharge of duties assigned to him, or relatively narrow jobs where important decisions made by others.
- 12.5% of the respondents are skilled labour. They are workers who are capable of working efficiently, of exercising considerable independent judgment and of discharging duties with responsibility. He must possess a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the trade, craft or industry in which he is employed.

Out of 14 households of other states,

- 57.14% are unskilled labour,
- 42.85% respondents are skilled labour consist of carpenters, plumbers, preparing tiles, tube-well, bar benders, tillers and painters etc. Female workers also get involved in the unskilled work and the company is ready to recruit them for more workforces.

Recruitment Workers through Kinship Networks

Kinship is the broad term for all the relationships that people are born into or create later in life that are considered binding in the eyes of society. It is one of the most basic principles for organizing individuals into social groups, roles and categories. Kinship ties provide social and emotional support, anchoring individuals within the societal context. For migrants, the bond shared amongst members of a community, can prove to be a big factor in creating a network of mutual inter-dependence, sustaining social support, and allowing individuals to take calculated risks to improve their lives.

The relevance of kinship ties in accessing labour market opportunities is also observed in the context of present study. Authors writing on migration have emphasized that caste and ethnicity play a central role in structuring migration especially recruitment (Arjan de haan 2004). Of the 30 total households, 20 households got a job through their friends and remaining 10 households got job through their relatives.

Migrants from Andhra Pradesh come from different backward districts East Godavari, Srikakulam, Guntur and Prakasam (Ongole), from where the highest number of migrants is observed. Migrants from other states come from backward districts such as Jharkhand (Lohardaga, Palamau); Odisha (Dharamgarh, Keonjhar), Chhattisgarh (Rajnandagoan, Durg), Uttar Pradesh (Kusinagr) and West Bengal (Bankura).

Here the *gravitation model of migration* is observed because large numbers of the workers of same locality are likely to move to one central place because of getting good income in the Hyderabad city. Many of them had said that distance is not an obstacle for them and these workers follow the *chain migration*. They maintain constant contacts with their friends who are working in the same company for years, who help them in providing work in the same company through contractors.

Migrants maintain strong social networks with their community members. Most of the migrants also tend to live together with their fellow group of people, thus forming clusters of the community in various parts of the city. Maintaining ties with community members through the celebration of festivals emerged to be the most preferred means followed by regional associations was the next preferred means.

The Christians go to church on Sundays which is inside their living area. This does not create any disturbances to the other workers community. They celebrate their respective festivals at their places without any hesitation. As said before, the language barrier creates a gap between the Hindi-speaking and Telugu-speaking people, but there is also a concern among the latter that they should not be exploited by the outsiders and would like to live in harmony. These people think they are most vulnerable and isolated from the main society.

Issues of Migrant Women Workers

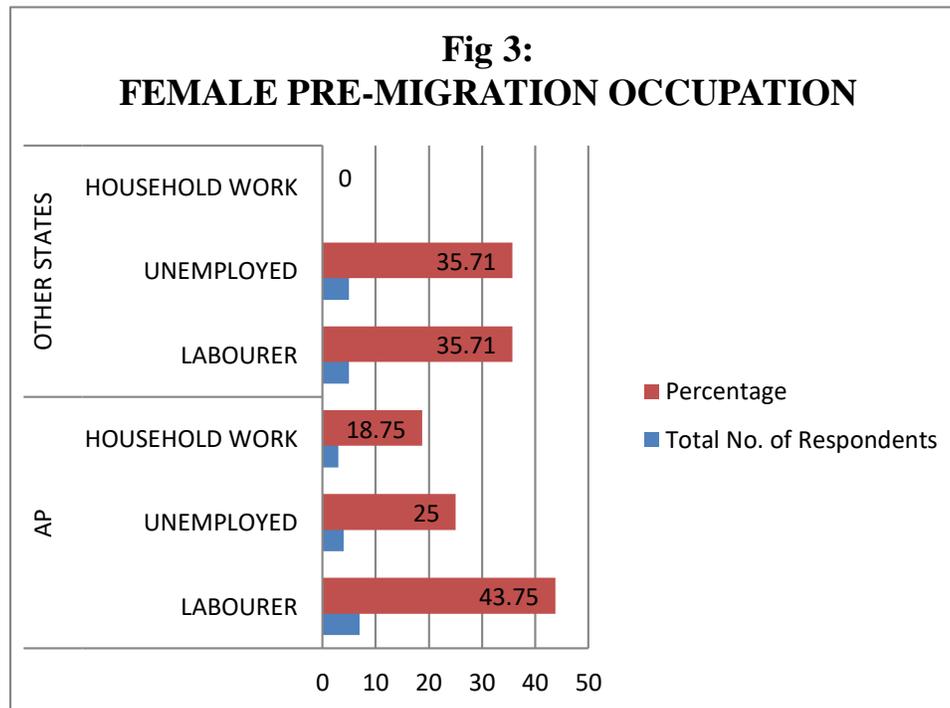
Although female migrants face many challenges, the phenomenon is not likely to fade away. Unlike male migration, which is subject to variable economic conditions, female migration has proven not only to be stable but also resilient in the face of economic changes. Places of origin and places of destination have different perspectives and responses to this durable phenomenon. It is important to see the problems of migrant construction workers with a gender perspective.

To say that women face double the amount of problems of their male counterparts would be an understatement. They bear the triple burden of work, home and children. Although the contribution made by them in this male-dominated sector is not as visible, they have for years been working tirelessly as secondary helpers, underpaid, exploited and marginalized. Women are employed mostly in the category of unskilled labour, which automatically means lower salaries and also reduces their avenues for up-gradation.

There are no statistics particularly on migrant women construction workers since most of them are left out of the system, in the sense that they are not registered anywhere. In addition, they do not stay in the urban areas all the time, since a large number of them stay in the city for a couple of years and then go back and then keep going to and fro depending on the economic opportunities available in these areas. There are, however, statistics available on women workers in the construction sector in general.

According to the NSSO Survey (1993-94), construction workers constituted 3.2% of the total workforce. 4.17% of all male workers and 1.27% of all female workers were engaged in construction activity. The figures for urban and rural construction workers were 6.3% and 2.3% respectively. Among women construction workers, more than 98% are casual workers, whereas the proportion of casual workers among women workers in all industries together is far less, about 75%.

Pre-migration Occupation of Female Workers



Collecting the data on pre-migration occupation of female workers gives us an idea of what type of work they used to do in the place of origin along with their family. It has been noticed that the share of female construction workers to the total female workforce has gone up marginally; the increase is lower than that observed in the corresponding share for males. In rural areas, only about 1% of the total rural women workers are found to be engaged in construction work mostly provided by public works. It has been found that rural women usually shift from agriculture to construction work in case of drought but most of them revert to agriculture after the drought.

Out of the information collected on the 16 households from the Andhra region about the pre-migration occupation of females:

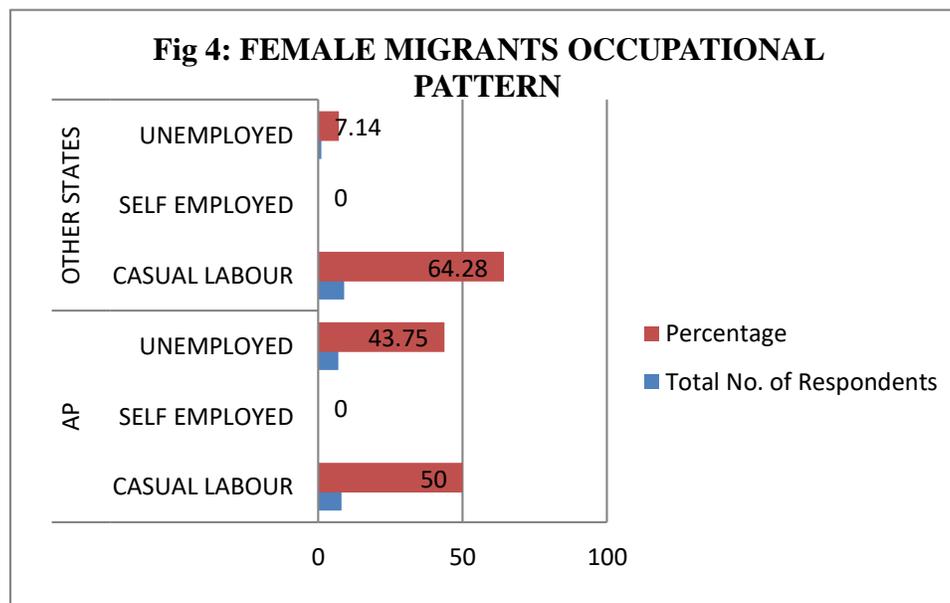
- about 43.75% were involved in agricultural and unskilled labour
- 25% were unemployed
- about 18.75% were involved in household work.

Out of the 14 households from other states, the pre-migration occupation of females:

- 35.71% were labourers
- 35.71% were unemployed.

Occupational Pattern of Female Migrants Workers

It has been noticed that although the percentage of female workers in the construction industry has gone up marginally, the increase is lower than the corresponding increase in the percentage of male workers. It has been found that most of the women workers shift from agriculture to the construction industry in case of drought but a large percentage of these revert to agriculture after the drought. However, due to rapid urbanization there has been large scale migration of workers into the urban areas from the rural areas. Since most of the women who migrate along with their families are unskilled, they are absorbed into the booming construction industry as unskilled labour.



As discussed earlier, the female workers from Andhra region do not participate or take part in any work. About 50% are casual labourers and 43.75% are unemployed. From the other states, the majority are casual labour (about 64.28%) and only 7.14% are unemployed.

The majority of the female workers are unskilled labour and they move together with their families. From the time female migration has become visible, the protection issues raised have been the same issues that migrants and migrant advocates fight for today: minimum wages, adherence to basic protection standards, and protection from brokers and agents in source countries or regions who often charge migrants excessive fees. For the most part, however, women migrants cope with their situation by tapping their own strengths, relying on the support of their networks, and accessing non-governmental organizations' assistance where available.

The contractors from the Nagarjuna Construction Company recruit equal number of male and female workers and they are paid equal wages without any discrimination. This is done to reduce gender conflicts and encourage female workers to take part in the work and improve their livelihood and it is not to ensure that more work available is for them.

One of the main forces that drive women into the construction sector is poverty. The poverty caused by the inadequate economic contribution of their other family members makes the economic contribution of the women in their family indispensable. The fact that there are employment opportunities available for women as well, compared to the few opportunities available in the rural areas acts as one of the factors why women also migrate with their male counterparts. This way they can keep the family together and also be an extra source of income for the family. Although there are socio-cultural reasons that may lead to migration, most of the workers migrate due to economic reasons. Most of the workers in the construction of the hostel premises in the HCU campus were agricultural workers in their villages. As agriculture is a seasonal occupation, they migrate to urban areas in search of employment when they do not have any work in their villages.

Nature of Work done by Women Workers

Women are employed in almost all the unskilled work related to the construction process, from foundation work, masonry, carrying material, etc. Unlike other industries where women are employed in semi-skilled or even skilled jobs, in the construction industry they are only employed in unskilled manual labour. The jobs in this sector, in fact are far more strenuous than in the manufacturing industries. They are mostly head-load workers who carry bricks, cement, sand, water, etc. from one place to another, sometimes over heights along precariously balanced wooden beams or other temporary structures. They are also involved in cleaning up, concreting and earthwork. Women help in carrying debris dug up at the excavation stage; they help in erecting of scaffolding and curing the floor and keeping it well until it sets.

Women's work is considered easy, suitable for the weak, appropriate for secondary income earner and by implication fit for irregular worker. By contrast, men's work is projected as 'tough' requiring physical strength, needing greater skill and fraught with danger and risks. But the fact is that women are more vulnerable to hazards than men. In construction projects in rural areas where there is a lower demand for agricultural work, the wages of women workers in the construction work is usually low.

Women Workers and Health Issues

Women bear the major brunt in the health area. Their health deteriorates due to the triple burden of work, home and children. Besides this, due to lack of access to the public hospitals or nursing homes, majority of the women deliver their babies at home. Women usually suffer from certain occupational hazards due to poor working conditions. Body aches, skin irritation and sunstrokes are common occurrences. In the brick kiln and tile factories, the main work-related problem for the women workers seemed to be the timings and the intensity of their work. Cramps in the legs were also common due to continuously working in one position. Skin infections and blisters occurred frequently due to working in the mud for long periods of time. Accidents took place when the pieces of glass, sharp stones or other foreign bodies were found in the soil. The employees made no provision for first aid or help of any kind. It was the hours of work that mattered, as they were all piece-rated workers. This problem is not faced by the female workers of my research area and as I said that they are treated equally with men and paid equally which I have found from my survey. The company provide only work to the women who are migrated along with their families, to ensure their income earnings.

New economic and social responsibilities may change the distribution of power within the family, leading to greater authority and participation in household decision-making and control over the family's resources. These also may cause positive shifts in the relationship between immigrant women and their husbands and children. However, participation in the labour force does not automatically improve equality between a migrant and her husband. For some migrant women, labour force participation may increase the burden that they must carry unless they find new alternatives to old roles, particularly those of childcare and housework. While migration may lead to an improvement in the social status of women, it may not change their relative position within the family.

Discussion

Having seen the history of exploitation by the contractors for many years, some of these old experienced migrants make some arrangements in order to protect their rights. They claim their rights by making transitional agreements for their security and protection with the companies, which are thoroughly checked by educated workers before migrating to the city. Having informed already to the people about the work in the company at their place of origin, they send the contractors to their place for the workforce. The arrangements made with the company are:

1. The company should provide them residence at the site area.
2. The company should provide insurance to every unskilled worker.
3. The company should provide them with food and drinking water facilities.
4. If any worker meets with an accident during the course of his work at the site, the company should bear all the hospital expenses and he/she should be given the remaining amount of money for his work.

To them distance is not an obstacle because the transport is being provided by the company and they also provide every worker insurance with health and other basic services. They are also given money by the company to pay off any debts which they have to pay at their hometown before they migrate. In doing so the worker gain trust of the company and he also suggest his friends or relatives to work for the company.

More work force available for the company, the higher the name and reputation of the company. Along with education, through observation of different factors that are involved in construction field, they are able to protect themselves and are united during the times of disturbances that are created by the contractors. Most of the respondents had entered into this agreement with the company and they are also offered freedom to leave the employment whenever they wished to-do so.

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