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CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

Migration in India is a common occurrence with millions of individuals migrating for better economic prospects. But the process disproportionately affects women and children, subjecting them to special vulnerabilities. This paper deals with the issues of migrant children and women, specifically regarding gendered vulnerabilities, schooling disruption, access to healthcare, child labour, and policy lacunae. Grounding its arguments in the literature and empirical evidence, the research points out how migration worsens gender disparities, denies access to essential services, and heightens the risk of exploitation. In spite of government efforts, huge loopholes continue to exist in policy implementation, rendering these groups poorly protected. Targeted policies, socially inclusive welfare programs, and a gender-sensitive approach towards the management of migration are used to address the issues.

KEY TERMS Migration in India, gendered vulnerabilities, schooling disruption, healthcare access, child labour, policy gaps, exploitation risks, social inclusion, welfare programs, gender-sensitive migration management.

INTRODUCTION :

Migration is a characteristic socio economic phenomenon in India, where millions migrate for work, to survive, or in search of better opportunities. Its effect is not the same, though women and children have their own and different and more urgent problems that are not made apparent in policy discourse. Women migrants are often pushed into insecure, informal work and exposed to health dangers, social isolation, and discrimination. Migrant children, on the other hand, experience disrupted education, greater vulnerability to child labour exploitation, and denial of healthcare.

Gendered risks organize the migration experience, with patriarchal cultural norms further narrowing the lives of women and girls. The loss of male household members will likely disproportionately burden women, who will have to take on more economic and care giving responsibilities. Children, and girls specifically, will likely feel the worst of the adverse effects of migration, such as malnutrition and reduced access to schooling.

Despite the presence of legislation like the Right to Education Act (2009) and social welfare programs, some of these migrant families are left out of such benefits due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and outdated policy models. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the precariousness of migrant welfare in India, and reforms at the system level are a priority. The present study focuses on the concerns of migrant women and children and evaluates the effectiveness of policies in addressing their concerns.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Gendered Vulnerabilities: The different impacts of Migration on Women and Children.**

Migration disproportionately affects women and children because of gendered vulnerabilities. Women tend to experience interrupted socio-economic wellbeing and diminished health-seeking behaviour, while children, especially girls, tend to face undernutrition, limited education, and access to healthcare (Mishra et al., 2022). Father's migration in patriarchal societies worsens inequalities, placing daughters at a higher risk of stunting and underweight conditions than sons (Lei et al., 2020). Further, economic pressures and cultural biases also compel girl children into labour migration, subjecting them to exploitation (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2012). These inequalities make gender-sensitive interventions necessary to address the negative consequences of migration for women and children.

- **Interrupted Education: The Challenge of Schooling for Migrant Children.**

Indian migrant children experience extreme education disruption from seasonal labour migration, even with the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 in force. Research in Odisha shows that economic stress compels families to migrate, taking children out of school and into work, with socio-economic constraints, illiteracy among parents, and language disparities exacerbating dropout rates (Barik & Paltasingh, 2024). Seasonal hostels intended to assist them seldom have adequate resources, and RTE schemes continue to be poorly executed (Barik & Paltasingh, 2024). Likewise, Roy et al. (2015) point out that remittances can benefit left behind children, whereas migrant children are excluded from schools because of uncertainty and denial of access,

and child labour risk is heightened. Tackling these challenges calls for focused policies, improved resource allocation, and tighter enforcement of education safeguards in order to provide equal learning opportunities for children of migrants.

- **Health Neglect: Challenges Faced by Migrant Women in Accessing Healthcare.**

Indian migrant women have high healthcare challenges faced by language and cultural disparities, discriminatory policies, and exploitative working conditions, which cause undesirable health consequences and social exclusion (Virupaksha, Kumar, & Nirmala, 2014). Most of them suffer from occupational risks such as skin diseases due to unsafe working conditions while being deprived of basic labour rights, which further contributes to their vulnerability (Srinivasan & Ilango, 2013). It takes culturally appropriate health services, enhanced workplace protections, and policy change to guarantee equitable access to health care and the rights of migrant women (Virupaksha et al., 2014; Srinivasan & Ilango, 2013).

- **Child Labor Among Migrants: Economic Necessity or Forced Circumstance:**

Child labour among India's migrant population suggests a double complicity of economic need and institutionalized inequality. The research done at West Bengal shows how children who are economically disadvantaged are forced to help out around the house, a hardship that is exacerbated by societal views and gender inequalities. (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2012). Girls are also at increased risk of abuse and exploitation as family members prioritize education for sons while relying on daughters' income as a form of gender-based forced labour. In the absence of social protection and livelihood, the boundary between coercion and choice becomes increasingly indistinct. Successful interventions will need to address economic vulnerabilities in addition to deeply rooted social inequalities in an effort to safeguard migrant children's rights (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2012).

- **Government Policies and Gaps: Are We Doing Enough for Migrant Women and Children?**

Indian government policies have repeatedly not done enough to shield migrant women and children, a shortfall dramatically laid bare in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although programs do exist, they are fragmented, based on old data (such as 2011 census for food security), and non-portable, with migrants being left out of basic entitlements (Sengupta & Jha, 2020; Dreze, 2020). Lockdown laid bare structural failings with millions left without livelihood or habitat through insensitive welfare regimes (Ghosh, 2020; Jadhav, 2020). Gendered vulnerabilities are typically disregarded in policies. Women face additional risks due to caregiving responsibilities, while children, particularly those from marginalized populations such as SC/STs, are more likely to be pushed into dangerous migration (Nupur & Dutta, 2024). Effective solutions require a holistic approach, including real-time information, portable social benefits, and global programs that connect migration with poverty reduction to address root causes and protect rights (Sengupta & Jha, 2020; Nupur & Dutta, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Migration continues to be a necessary survival mechanism for the majority of Indians, but it overwhelmingly affects women and children. Gendered vulnerabilities, interruptions in education, withholding of access to healthcare, and financial deprivation drive child and female migrant workers into exposed positions. Some of these issues can be addressed by policies that exist, yet they are not always enforced, and the majority of migrants remain beyond social protection schemes.

In order to render development relevant, policy interventions have to be gender-responsive, evidence-based, and inclusive. Strengthening portability of entitlements, extending access to health and education, and labour rights are milestones towards the protection of migrant communities. There must be a collective, multi stakeholder action on the part of government agencies, civil society, and community organizations to avoid leaving behind migrant women and children during India's development process. Meeting these concerns is not only an issue of social justice but also a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable development.

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