

Gendered vulnerabilities, Discrimination and Abuse among Female Migrants - A Special Reference to Return Female Domestic Workers in Kerala, India

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Women have long been migrating for a variety of reasons, either independently or as dependents. But, migrant women's contribution was largely unseen as they were mostly perceived as dependents of migrant male family members. Despite their contribution to the economic and social development of countries of origin and destination, as well as to families and communities back home, women migrant workers undergo a lot of discrimination and human rights violations during the migration process. The working and living conditions of female migrants are also a gender issue. Their status as women, as migrants or non-nationals makes them particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and discrimination. While men usually work in groups such as construction or plantation work, women generally go into individualised work environments such as domestic services where there is less chance of social support. Thus, domestic workers are one of the most vulnerable groups of women workers. Domestic workers often face exploitative situations, especially in terms of pay, long hours of work, poor working conditions and accommodation. Since domestic work is generally not legally regulated, the terms and conditions of work are often unilaterally established by the employer. As the employee is extremely dependent on the employer, in most of the cases abuse is less visible.

Female labour migration is a conspicuous new feature in the context of globalization in developing countries like India. A reasonable proportion of migrants in India are originating from the state of Kerala. Studies have shown that in Kerala, on the whole the conditions are favourable for an increasing trend in female migration. When females migrate for employment purposes, especially in the unorganized sectors like domestic services, the situation may be far different from that of their male counter parts. Though the studies conducted on migration in Kerala provide rich information about issues of out migration and emigration there is lack of information about the female domestic workers.

The present paper is based on the primary data collected from six villages of Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. For the present study, the villages in Thiruvananthapuram district were arranged in ascending order of female work participation rates. The villages were divided into three strata namely villages under less than 10 percentage female work participation, villages between 10 to 20 percentage and villages having more than 20 percentage female work participation. Two villages were selected randomly from each stratum and a total of six villages were selected for the study. From each selected village, two to three wards were selected randomly in order to get approximately 1000 households in each village. The identification of women migrants was done by a complete house listing of 5787 households in all the selected wards. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for the study. The present paper is based on female return domestic workers in Kerala.

The analysis reveals that more than half of the migrants were in the age group 30 to 45 years. More than half of the migrants were currently married and a considerable proportion of the migrants were either widowed or separated. About half of the migrants were Christians and majority of them belong to other backward castes. A considerable proportion of the migrants were illiterates. The most important reasons for migration were financial problems and poverty and the other reasons reported were repayment of loans/debts, landlessness, for marriage of children/siblings and education of children. Majority of the domestic workers were international migrants and the major place of destinations were gulf countries. More than one fourth of them had migrated at least two times for work purposes and only 30 percent had migrated with a written contract. Around half the migrants had faced some kind of problems during their first migration such as language problem, food related problem, health problems, physical and sexual abuse and problem in adjusting with new environment.

Majority of the migrants had to work more than 15 hours per day and about half of them had to work in not only employer's household but also other relative's houses as well. More than 90 percent did not receive any days off in a week. About a quarter of them did not get regular salary. However, a substantial proportion of them used to get extra benefits such as clothes, medical allowances, gifts during festivals and gold. About

32 percent of them had faced some kind of discrimination such as religious as well as regional discrimination. Forty percent of the migrants had to face some kind of exploitations such as long working hours, non-payment of salary, irregular payment and about same percent had to face verbal or physical abuse. About 10 percent of them had to face sexual exploitation from their employer or colleagues during their stay abroad.