

# Feminization of Indian Migration: Patterns and Prospects

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**Abstract**

The migration of women or female migration has emerged as an important field of research within the larger domain of migration studies and is being extensively explored under various disciplines. This growing trend can be attributed to some major developments in international migration such as rising numbers of women migrants, growth of women-centric occupations, migration of women in an independent capacity, women-related legislations and growth of gendered perspectives on various issues. These factors together increased the visibility of women in the migration process and have given rise to what has been termed the 'feminization of migration'. This paper explores the various nuances of the feminization of migration and aspects of female migration focusing on India. It begins with an overview of the growing numbers of women in the migratory flows and goes on to determine that despite the rising numbers and increased participation of women in the developmental dynamics of migration, they remain increasingly vulnerable and exposed to exploitation. The paper also highlights some of the critical policy decisions of the Government of India. The paper concludes that feminization of migration has undoubtedly increased the visibility of women in the migration discourse but much more needs to be done in terms of generating appropriate data, highlighting women's role in the developmental process, evolving policies for ensuring their protection and security and above all empowering them and increasing their participation in the labour market.

**Keywords**

Feminization of migration, women and migration, migration and development, international migration, migration of Indian women

**Women in migratory flows: an overview**

The increased visibility and the recognition of women as the new protagonists in the migration process, and more generally the issue of gender, have pervaded the academic literature for almost the past 30 years. Nevertheless, women constituted a substantial share and were part and parcel of the migration and settlement processes much before this period. Estimates based on United Nations (UN) Population Division data confirms that in 1960, female migrants accounted for nearly 47% of the total number of migrants, and this proportion has risen, since then, to reach 48% in 1990 and nearly 49% in the year 2000 (UN, 2017a). Overall, during these years, the total number of international migrants also increased, but the increase in female migrants is almost 8% higher than

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**Table 1.** Female migrants as a percentage of the international migrant stock.

Year	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Percentage	49.4	49.3	48.9	48.3	48.2	47.9

Source: United Nations, 2019.

**Table 2.** International migrant stock at mid-year (female).

Year	Numbers
1990	7,53,49,784
1995	7,96,30,779
2000	8,55,59,220
2005	9,37,54,736
2010	10,67,20,229
2015	11,99,97,907
2019	13,01,54,101

Source: United Nations, 2019.

the increase in male migrants (Zlotnik, 2003). Moreover, the UN population data also indicates that in 2019, 202 million international migrants, equivalent to 74% of the total migrant population, were of working age; that is, between the ages of 20 and 64. This fact also reflects the growing number of working women migrants and their increasing participation in the labour market. Tables 1 and 2 give the share of female migrants in the total number of international migrants

As far as internal migration or migration within countries is concerned, it is extremely difficult to measure and quantify because people move freely within the borders of a country without restrictions. However, according to the UN. Human Development Report (2009), the number of internal migrants is almost four times more than the international migrants. And as per the International Labour Organization (ILO), women constitute almost 70–80% of the internal migrants (ILO, 2020).

In terms of region-wise and country-wise geographical spread, of the international migrants, as per UN data, in 2019 nearly 176 million resided in high-income countries, around 82 million resided in middle-income countries and about 13 million in low-income countries. It means that 99.6 million or almost 61% of all migrant workers reside in three sub-regions: Northern America, the Arab States and Europe. In terms of percentage of female migrants, a striking difference in the distribution can be observed, as the share of migrant women was highest in Northern America (51.8%) and Europe (51.4%), and lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (47.5%), as well as in Northern Africa and Western Asia (35.5%) (UN, 2019). However, as the studies point out, the trends in Asian countries are towards an increase (Fleury, 2016).

Migration is induced by several positive/negative or push-and-pull factors or a combination of both. The majority of people migrate due to economic reasons whereby people move from places with fewer economic opportunities to places with more economic opportunities. Colonialism and its legacy of uneven development have played a significant role in shaping international migration patterns. Migration is also induced by global demographic trends, which again attract people from Asia and Africa to the Developed countries. Other than these, there are also distress situations caused by climate changes or political upheaval, or crisis situations that trigger the displacement of people, turning them into refugees or asylum seekers. Women, too, migrate primarily for similar reasons, but some added factors, such as escape from gender-based violence and the patriarchal

norms of society or the family concerns, also play a role. Women's migration, therefore, is shaped by a combination of factors like household decisions, gendered societal norms in origin and destination countries, labour market conditions, education and skill levels, crisis situations and so on. (Asis, 2003; Crush and Williams, 2005; Ghib, 2018; O'Neil et al., 2012). Gender and gender relations impact migration at every stage; that is, the reasons for migration, the process of integration in the destination country, the continuing links with the home country, the transfer and utilization of remittances and the possibilities of savings and investment. At all these stages, gender and gendered cultural formats and roles affect women and men differently and produce different outcomes for them (Fleury, 2016; Omelaniuk, 2005). Overall, women have a larger impact on social and cultural trends and are greater agents of socio-cultural change than men (Global Migration Group, 2017; Pedraza, 1991). Women are also generally more vulnerable to violence and abuse of the migration process and may get exposed to new forms of discrimination. On the other hand, migration can also provide them with new opportunities, a vital source of income, greater autonomy, self-confidence and social status. Therefore, the impact of migration on women are varied and should be analysed at personal and familial levels as well as at societal level.

## **Female migration from India**

India continues to be the top source of international migrants since the 1990s, with 1 in 20 migrants worldwide born in India. The number of international Indian migrants has more than doubled over the past 25 years, growing about twice as fast as the world's total migrant population. According to Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) data, the total stock of Indian emigrants can be estimated as 13,885.1, which is 1.1% of the total Indian population. In this regard, it is less than the overall share of migrants in the world population, which is 3.4%. Among the top select countries to which Indian people have migrated since 1990 are the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Kuwait, Oman, Canada and Qatar. The share of Indians moving to these countries has grown over time. Nevertheless, there is a huge inadequacy and inaccuracy in the available data on migrants and the issues related to them. The discrepancies can be seen in the numbers, methodology and standards of data in the Tables 3, 4, and 5, so much so that it is difficult to make a coherent presentation of the data. The three sources used here are the UN Population Division, the ILO and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India.

According to the latest figures of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, the top destination countries for Indian migrants in numbers are given in Table 5. It can be seen in the Tables 4-5 that the top destination countries given by the UN are different from the one given by the MEA. Moreover, different standards are used for different years and from different sources. In Table 3, ILOSTAT gives the annual outflow of Indian migrants until 2016, but for the year 2018 it gives the total number of Indians abroad which is 13,885.1. Apart from this, as per the UN data, the percentage of Indians for the year 2020 in UAE is 19.53 (Table 4) of the total population of 9,890,402 of UAE, which comes to 1931595.51. This figure is less than the ILO figure of 2018 and much less than MEA figures. In Table 5, the data given by the MEA does not specify the year. Thus, a great deal of discrepancy can be noticed in figures and standards when a comparison is made between different sources.

The data on international labour migration in India also lacks inclusion of gender, which leads to the near invisibility of women migrants, at least in the data. While the UN, ILO and MEA completely exclude the female share from the data on India, the World Bank gives figures for only two years, 2015 and 2017, and it stands at 48.8% (World Bank, 2019). As a matter of

**Table 3.** The outflow of nationals by year from India (thousands).

Year	Numbers in thousands
2010	641
2011	627
2012	747
2013	817
2014	805
2015	781
2016	506

Source: ILOSTAT, 2018.

**Table 4.** Top destination countries and share of Indian migrants in its population 1990–2019.

Country	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
United Arab Emirates	6.92	9.33	11.55	13.41	22.03	19.99	19.53
USA	6.80	10.43	13.22	14.49	13.49	15.00	15.20
Saudi Arabia	13.69	12.99	12.34	12.68	11.94	12.58	13.94
Oman	2.30	3.95	4.21	3.89	3.58	6.76	7.57
Canada	2.52	3.35	4.02	4.43	3.91	4.16	4.05
Australia	1.06	1.09	1.14	1.55	2.49	2.82	3.25

Source: International Migrant Stock 2019, United Nations.

**Table 5.** Top destination countries for Indian migrants (numbers).

Country	Total (Ministry of External Affairs)	Total (International Labour Organization)
United Arab Emirates	3425144	3100000 (2018)
USA	4460000	1280000 (2018)
Saudi Arabia	2594947	2812000 (2018)
Canada	1689055	—
UK	1764000	—
Kuwait	1029861	928000 (2018)
Australia	496000	—

Source: MEA, India.

fact, among all the South Asian countries, only Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka publish sex disaggregated data of international migration (ILO, 2013). However, in India, migrants under the category of ECR (Emigration Check Required) on their passports<sup>1</sup> who migrate to 18 ECR marked countries<sup>2</sup> are recorded as they register for emigration clearance. The ECR category, thus, clearly reflects the number of female migrants. Although it is difficult to know the exact numbers because of the large scale undocumented migration, Table 6 shows the number of female Indian migrants for the years 1990 and 2015.

Table 7 shows the share of female migrants in the top destination countries for Indian migrants in 2019. It may give a rough idea of the percentage of female migrants from India. Table 7 also

**Table 6.** Indian female migrants in select years.

Country	Female 1990	Total 1990	Female 2015	Total 2015
United Arab Emirates	104635	458294	789005	3499337
Saudi Arabia	294397	906468	585822	1894380

Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015 data.

**Table 7.** Percentage of female migrants in top destination countries.

Country	Percentage of female migrants (2019)
United Arab Emirates	26.3
USA	51.7
Saudi Arabia	31.4
Canada	52.4
UK	52.0
Kuwait	33.6
Australia	50.4

Source: United Nations, 2019.

**Table 8.** Total migrant stock and percentage of female migrants in India (1990–2019).

Year	Number of migrants (in thousands)	Percentage of female migrants
1990	7594.8	47.8
1995	6952.2	48.1
2000	6411.3	48.5
2005	5923.9	48.6
2010	5439.8	48.7
2015	5241.0	48.8
2019	5154.7	48.8

Source: United Nations, 2019.

clearly affirms the global trend of the region-wise disparity in the share of female migrants. UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have a lesser percentage than the USA, UK, Canada and Australia.

Although this paper deals mainly with female migrants moving out of India, it is worth mentioning that India is also the thirteenth-largest migrant-receiving country according to the UN migration report (Table 8). While there is a scarcity of data on women emigrating from India, substantial data is available on women immigrating to India.

## Feminization of migration: a debate

In recent times a term that has gained currency in the migration discourse is the ‘feminization of migration’ and it is important to understand it before proceeding further. In a generic way, feminization of migration can be ascribed to quantitative as well as the qualitative changes in female migration. It is a multidimensional, dynamic and ever-growing phenomenon (Ghib, 2018; Gouws,

2007; Maymon, 2017; Tittensor and Fethi, 2017). There has been an increase in the quantity (i.e. number) of women migrants and there has been an increase in their visibility due to participation in the developmental process, academic discourse, and change in the role and the profile over the past few decades. Therefore, no one factor can be singularly attributed to this trend called ‘feminization of migration’.

There is no doubt that the number of female migrants has increased by around two to three percentage points (as shown earlier in the paper) in last couple of years, but Donato and Gabaccia (2016) show with data that the increase in the share of women migrants occurred during 1960s. Increased regulation on immigration in many countries pushed global migrations toward a gender balance as they allowed families to immigrate. Even when the share of women in international migration was at 47%, the numbers would have been large enough to create visibility. However, women mostly remained invisible in the documentation and discourse on migration. In the case of internal migration, too, the percentage of women has remained high traditionally. Yet migration continued to be considered primarily as a male phenomenon (a commonly used metaphor in India is ‘Mr X + 1’ in which ‘+1’ represented a woman). Thus, the term can be misleading if it is only based on an increase in the proportion of women in the international migration.

So, what has changed much more dramatically than the numbers is the change in the profile of women migrants. Gouws points out: ‘The migration of women independent of men is called the “feminization of migration” ’ (2007: 1). More and more women have started migrating independently for work and have become the primary migrants. They have become the main income earners in the family, rather than being ‘family dependants’ travelling with their husbands or joining them abroad. As per the International Organization for Migration (IOM), half of the total number of women migrants are now migrating independently or as heads of households (as quoted in Fleury, 2016). Both single and married women are migrating independently for employment, which also redefines traditional gender roles within families and societies to some extent.

The rise of women as independent migrants has been chiefly a response to the gender-selective or women-centric demand for labour at the global level (Castles and Miller, 2009: 67) and the massive demand for cheap female labour from the developing countries. The global demographic and employment patterns have significantly increased the demand for caregivers, domestic workers, nursing and child-rearing women personnel. Moreover, since women migrants tend to be employed in low-wage and labour-intensive jobs, the demand for them is high in the labour market (Beneria et al., 2016: 80–82; Joekes, 1995). Paiewonsky (2009: 4) points out that the care crisis in the developed world thus provides an outlet for the catastrophic failure of development policies worldwide, and most particularly for the effects of the neoliberal structural reforms imposed on poor countries over the last decades. In her work on Asian-Americans, Espiritu (1999: 628) concludes that ‘the recent growth of female-intensive industries—and the racist and sexist “preference” for the labor of immigrant women—has enhanced women’s employability over that of some men’.

The other significant factor that brought about the change relates to the awareness among policymakers of the significance of female migration and its role in the developmental process especially in sending remittances. This has led to an increase in gender-specific legislations at the level of international organizations, regional bodies, and destination and origin countries. There are regular additions and changes in the legislations regarding women migrants in the UN, ILO, IOM and other such bodies. In addition, gender is one of the agendas of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) under the aegis of the UN.

Along with the developments mentioned above, one of the most critical elements in the feminization of migration has been the upsurge in feminist scholarship in migration studies, which brought gendered perspectives on migration from the margins to the forefront and made the scholarly discourse on migration shift towards women. Migration theories were reinvented to

incorporate and privilege the issues and experiences of women under the influence of feminism (Pande, 2018). Nevertheless, this shift was gradual and can be divided into three phases. The first phase was from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, and it added women into migration research. Consequently, the documentation of female migration grew, but the issue remained as only a sub-theme in migration studies (Morokvasic, 1984; Pande, 2018).

During the late 1970s, the second wave of feminist theory moved towards the more radical Feminist Standpoint Theory. It rooted its claims in the social context and advocated for taking the lived experiences of women and the marginalized as the basis of scientific enquiry. It was a more radical theory, analysing and drawing on power relationship between the genders (Gurung, 2021; Petrozzielo, 2013). During the 1980s, the new emphasis in the migration research on the ‘household’ as a ‘micro-unit in the analysis of migration’ also helped highlight women’s role (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992, p. 5). Further, during the 1990s, under the so-called ‘post-rational feminism’, the essentialization of women as a category was questioned. Instead, gender was brought to the foreground, emphasizing differences in the experiences of men and women. Post-rational feminism also underlined that gender intersects with institutions like nationality, class, race, ethnicity, poverty, etc. (Macdonald, 2007; Pande, 2018). In essence, it can be said that there was a systematic growth in the epistemology on gender which also impacted migration studies.

Therefore, feminization of migration can be credited to a combination of factors that have led to women’s visibility in the migration process. The migration discourse increasingly became more gendered, which is important for understanding the positive and negative impacts of the feminization of migration and highlighting women’s experiences and the ways in which they cope with the changes due to migration. According to Piper (2008: 1287), ‘feminisation of migration requires a comprehensive analysis in the context of the complexity of contemporary patterns of international migration’.

In the case of India, as discussed earlier, the share of female migrants overall remains between 48% and 49%. As far as adding women into the documentation is concerned, India is at the rudimentary stage. It is a challenge to get gender-segregated data on any aspect of migration, such as the proportion of women in the total migrant population over the years, their share in remittances and other contributions towards development. In the Indian states, like Kerala, which records high levels of migration of women, particularly nurses, to the West Asian countries, the documentation is much more gender-inclusive than the national scenario. The state of Andhra Pradesh is also witnessing the migration of low-skilled domestic workers and semi-skilled healthcare workers and hence women are increasingly receiving attention in the data (Bindhulakshmi, 2010; Percot, 2006). In reality, the migration of women as independent migrants is a fast-growing trend in India (Kodoth and Jacob, 2013; Madhumathi, 2013; Walton-Roberts and Irudaya Rajan, 2013). Indian women as highly skilled migrants and students are still not a large group but have shown a growing trend. As per the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Indians, who account for 73.9% of the total H-1B visa holders, are 309,986 in number. Of these, 20% are women. At the global level, women account for 25% of H-1B visas (*Economic Times*, 2018). As far as other aspects of feminization are concerned, female migration is receiving attention, especially in the academic discourse. Prominent studies have been conducted in Kerala under the NORKA (Department of Non-Resident Keralite’s Affairs) and Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. There has been a close co-ordination between the data collection and development of coherent, legal and effective policy structures necessary to manage female migration. At the level of central government, although the Government of India has introduced significant policy changes to facilitate migration of women, and their protection, an effective evidence- or data-based policy structure is acutely lacking. Whatever data are available for public use employ widely varying methodologies that rely on differing mechanisms. As a result, at the national level, several attributes of gender-based

welfare initiatives, economic activities, labour market experience and participation go unnoticed and undiscussed.

Migration can have both positive and negative impacts on the well-being of female migrants, and hence it is crucial to have a deeper understanding of it to frame policies for their protection and celebrate their contribution in migration-stimulated development.

## **Women, migration and development**

Migration has historically represented a major opportunity for development for families as well as nations. In the present globalized world, linkages between development and migration have become increasingly profound and are receiving greater attention. Studies point out that migration does offer new opportunities to women despite the difficulties and constraints, making their role more diversified and significant (Buijs, 1993; Fleury, 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000; Levitt and Nadya Jaworsky, 2007; Meyer, 2016). They witness new opportunities for financial independence in addition to improved status in families and communities. It also leads to improvement in their authority, self-esteem and access to resources and positively impacts women in general. They are also now key contributors to their homeland economy through remittances and human capital. These new opportunities have provided new spaces and agency for women to move beyond the fixed notions of femininity and challenge the patriarchal norms of society (Pande, 2018).

Remittances are one of the major developmental components of migration, and in the context of gender remittances can be seen from the senders' and recipients' perspective. Even when women are not migrating themselves and remain behind when their husbands migrate, their position is very often (though not always) impacted positively as they receive remittances, run the household and family business and participate in agricultural activities (Le Goff, 2016; Press Information Bureau (PIB), 2018). The gender roles change, giving more authority to women. Studies (e.g. Desai and Banerji, 2008) also point out that women not residing in extended families are faced with both higher levels of responsibilities and greater autonomy in contrast, women who live in extended households.

When women migrate as independent migrants and send back remittances, their role in the developmental process drastically increases (Maymon, 2017). Despite the difficulties female migrants encounter in the labour market, they tend to remit a higher proportion of their income and are more resilient than their male counterparts. Even though they are generally in low-wage jobs, they are more frequent and stable as far as sending remittances are concerned (Le Goff, 2016). They also direct their remittances more towards education, health and family welfare (Omelaniuk, 2005). Migrant women are also increasingly playing a more significant role in poverty reduction, though there has been a lack of actual data. They become property owners in their local communities, buying land and housing and even starting a small business at some point. Mexico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have developed workable models to prepare, train, support and protect their women for migration to different countries, as well as their return and reintegration, and the well-being of families remaining behind (IOM, 2005). The release of gender-desegregated data by these countries facilitates the reading and analysis of female migrant-related issues.

In the case of India, the developmental contribution of migrant women is yet to be recorded substantially, be it remittances, investment, philanthropy or any other aspect of development. Despite the increased presence of women in international migration and their immense contribution, women are still struggling to find their visibility and voice in the migrant labour force. However, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh show gender inclusiveness in data and incentives. It is worth bringing up the example of Kerala again. The state was witnessing large-scale migration to Gulf countries since the mid-1970s and substantial betterment in the human development index with complete literacy. Against this backdrop, as the demand for gender-based occupations grew,

Kerala's women found themselves better placed to seize the opportunity. There has been a steady increase in the number of women emigrants since the late 1990s. The Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) showed that the percentage increase in emigration was 124% among females as against 24% among males during 1999–2004. The KMS gives substantially comprehensive data on women's migration from the state with their share, education level, age, economic activities, age-wise income, years abroad, etc. According to KMS 2018, among the 2.1 million emigrants 15.8% were female (Zachariah and Irudaya Rajan, 2018: 4).

A study conducted by Priyadarsini (2018) on two Panchayat regions in Kerala shows that large-scale female emigration to the Gulf countries was from the middle-income group and further led to the skilling and migration of females (general and BSc nurses). Primary data indicate that the remittances sent by most of the female emigrants were the main source of income of their families and to a large extent, changed their status in families. This study also showed that women were both senders and the managers of the remittances. To quote Priyadarsini, apart from financial remittances,

social remittances of migrant women such as ideas, skills, attitudes, knowledge, etc. promoted socio-economic development, human rights, and gender equality. It has led to a total change in the standard of living, lifestyles, decision making regarding savings, spending pattern, education of their children, health consciousness of the households, etc. (2018: 50)

This study vindicates many studies and reports about the way female migrants contribute to the development of home countries through financial and social remittances. However, female migrants have a significant impact on the destination countries as well through their competencies and skills. These developments led to major changes towards gender equality and quality of life (UN, 2017b).

## **Migration and vulnerability of women**

While it is true that, overall, women's participation in migration and development has increased, it is also evident that their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse has also increased. These challenges are at various levels and in various forms, so much so that it will be difficult to incorporate a detailed discussion in this paper. Migration has the potential for improving the lives of women migrants, but the inherent existing discriminatory structures in the host or the home country expose them to many disadvantages, discriminations and vulnerabilities. Kawar (2003: 72–73) summarizes the whole situation in the following words:

[D]uring the decision to migrate many women lack proper information and know-how about the migration procedures and financial matters which may lead to exploitative situations. Moreover, employment options for women are generally minimal. Many studies indicate that a significant number of migrant women perform the type of work that is not related to their qualification and skill. As compared to men, more migrant women end up performing 3D jobs. Women more than men tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector which is not covered by labour legislation or social protection. Women also have limited access to information as they get limited opportunities to build networks. They lack knowledge of their rights, and in cases of exploitation fail to get the required help. It is also seen that the authorities in the destination countries also do not treat migrant women with respect and dignity.

While it is also true that women have become primary migrants and have managed to break many stereotypical patriarchal frameworks, pre-existing gender norms continue to deprive them of equal status in the family and community, or of opportunities. Migration simultaneously reinforces and challenges patriarchy in its multiple forms. To accommodate family and childcare responsibilities,

women are either compelled or opt to not take jobs or to take only part-time jobs, which negatively impacts their integration into the labour market. Moreover, issues like marital disputes, dowry demands or violation of basic rights are perpetuated because of the jurisdictional problems between homeland and host land (Fleury, 2016; Kang, 2003; Kurien, 1999). The vulnerabilities arising from being a female migrant negatively affect job prospects, wages and job quality in the host country. Despite the growth of women-centric jobs, most migrant women are concentrated at the bottom rung of the occupational hierarchy and work in vulnerable sectors such as domestic work (especially in the live-in modality).

Furthermore, in many situations, they are also pushed into sexual abuse and prostitution. Women of a particular race, class, ethnicity and/or nationality are especially vulnerable. As Li (2018) explains, ‘migrant women face challenges and barriers as both migrants and women; a double disadvantage’. Migration can also entrench traditional roles and make gender hierarchy more rigid. The idea of losing control over women may result in physical abuse, honour killings and other cruelties (Carling, 2005; Fleury, 2016; Kang, 2003; Kurien, 1999; Pande, 2018).

The other challenge that gendered discourse on migration faces is the homogenization of women as a category that undermine specific problems faced by each category of women migrant. As gender cuts across other variables, it produces different experiences for different categories of women; that is, when they migrate as skilled/highly skilled, semi-skilled/unskilled or displaced/refugees/trafficked migrants. The challenge, therefore, is to provide for their inclusion in the labour market and ensure their basic rights and protection based on the context of migration. Thus, gender-specific challenges and outcomes are varied and exist at several levels, and these must be understood and incorporated in policymaking and research:

- **Women as dependent migrants:** a large number of women continue to migrate as dependants and family unions. Women’s migration across India is driven primarily by marriage, though a slight change is visible in this trend in the last decade. Also, as dependants, migrant women do acquire agency and ultimately become part of the workforce but not necessarily in jobs appropriate to their skills. In addition, they often lag in gaining language proficiency, skills acquisition and other integration measures due to family responsibilities (O’Neil et al., 2012).
- **Women as semi-skilled/unskilled migrants:** apart from dependant migrants, many women migrate as unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The occupations involved in this category range from domestic workers to caregivers and semi-trained medical personnel to many unorganized sector jobs. Such women workers have shown substantial agency in decision-making and spending and often develop a complementarity with working women in the host countries by taking on housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities. Despite this, women in these categories are in a highly disadvantageous position (O’Neil et al., 2012). Their lack of education and of awareness about rights and privileges frequently lead them into exploitative conditions. They face isolation and may spend years without seeing the children they left back home. In most cases, the state fails to monitor and control this sizeable labour market sector (Ghib, 2018). India is a main source of women migrating in this sector. Many of them are employed in domestic jobs and hold temporary work contracts attached to an employer like the ‘Kafala system’<sup>3</sup> in West Asian countries where most Indian women workers migrate.
- **Highly skilled/skilled migrants:** highly skilled women are in the best-placed category with access to the job market and integrate well into the host society. However, many highly skilled Indian women willingly, or under patriarchal cultural norms, prioritize their domestic responsibilities and opt for informal employment (Radhakrishnan, 2011; Talukdar, 2012).

This impacts their labour market inclusion and creates a disparity in their status vis-à-vis men. Women from India are migrating as highly skilled, but the visa restrictions (such as H1-B and H-4 categories) render them disadvantaged (Pessar, 1999; Wilson, 2018). The other segment of skilled migrants is students. India is the second-largest student-sending country. The number of female students has also increased over the years but there is a lack of documentation on this in India.

- **Irregular migration/trafficking/refugees/asylum seekers:** these categories are the most vulnerable sector and they place women at greatest risk of abuse during the migration journey and at the destinations. Irregular migration continues to pose a significant challenge worldwide. Apart from that, human trafficking, to which women are subjected, is considered a ‘crime against humanity’ (Obokata, 2005; Pocar, 2007). Refugee women and asylum seekers too are extremely vulnerable as even if they get refugee status, their social and labour market inclusion remains a challenge. As per the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2018), almost 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2019 due to persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. As far as the share of women refugees is concerned, there is a great deal of regional imbalance. Europe has the lowest proportion of women and children with only 44% and 24% respectively. In contrast to this, sub-Saharan Africa has 52% women among refugees.

## **Indian government policy initiatives regarding women migrants**

The increased awareness and understanding about female migrants have led to some important policy initiatives for women migrants by the Government of India. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether the overall policy structure has become gender sensitive or gender inclusive. This section mainly deals with some of the important policy descriptions, which clearly reflects that Government of India takes an overall paternalistic or protective approach towards women migrants. The government has come up with many welfare measures and policies for overseas women migrants from time to time, taking into account the different contexts of female migration. A detailed description of these can be found on the MEA website, and this section is based mainly on that.

One of the major complaints that the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs receives regarding women migrants is harassment/desertion of Indian women married to Indian nationals settled or working abroad. This issue has surfaced in the Indian Parliament several times. A large number of Indian women get married to overseas Indian men and get into various kinds of problems like desertion, domestic violence, separation and lack of compensation. The MEA receives regular petitions, grievances and complaints and makes efforts to empower women ‘by providing them information about legal procedures, filing court cases, issuance of summons and many such matters’ (MEA, 2020a). The MEA also takes actions such as ‘Look Out Circulars, revoking/impounding passports, obtaining maintenance and child support, providing lawyers’, etc. (MEA, 2020a). Several empanelled non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actively engaged in redressing the grievances of women in marital distress in 51 countries. To cite an example, the Indian High Commission in London works with an NGO named the Good Human Foundation, which assisted in 36 cases during 2010–2012 at a cost of Rs 19,65,971 (MEA, 2019). Considering the growing instances of marital disputes and providing a more effective solution, a Bill titled the Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian Bill, 2019 was introduced in Rajya Sabha on 11 February 2019. This Bill is under the consideration of the Standing Committee on External Affairs (MEA, 2020a).

These initiatives by the government are, no doubt, commendable but insufficient for addressing a mammoth problem. Scores of such deserted and divorced women are facing survival issues in

Punjab and other Indian states. Their rehabilitation and relocation through proper skilling and employment or remarriage should also be on the government agenda.

Apart from marital distress, another primary concern of the Government of India is related to the emigration of women for employment under the ECR category. The government has fixed the age for female workers going to ECR countries at 30 years. It has also been made mandatory that women workers ‘holding ECR Passports and going to eighteen ECR countries for overseas employment are bound to emigrate only through State-run recruitment agencies’ (MEA, 2020a). A foreign employer directly recruiting a domestic service worker is supposed to deposit a security of US \$2500 in the form of a bank guarantee with the Indian mission. The foreign employer can also recruit through six government/state-run Indian recruiting agents. The foreign employer is also required to register in the E-migrate system after the concerned Indian mission validates them (MEA, 2019).

The fixation of age at 30 years for female migrants has been facing great deal of criticism by a section of academia and practitioners. On several occasions, the government has even banned the movement of female domestic workers to some countries temporarily after complaints of harassment. This provision applies only to low-skilled workers who are in dire need of employment. As Sonkar and Pal (2018) point out, ‘[i]ntervention by the Indian Government should instead be dedicated towards empowering these women through actively developing their skills in order to enable them to be eligible for safer, higher-skilled categories of work’.

An Integrated Nodal Agency, under the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), has been set up as an inter-ministerial body to provide timely solutions for Indian women facing harassment abroad. Indian missions and posts abroad provide online consular assistance to Indian nationals in distress, including Indian women, through its portal MADAD (MEA in Aid of Diaspora in Distress), launched in 2015 for reintegration and rehabilitation programmes, grievance redressal mechanisms and support services at the pre-departure phase. It also has a module on ‘Marital Disputes’. The ministry’s grievance redressal mechanism was strengthened with the launch of the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) Version 7.0 in February 2020. A consular helpline is being run in 11 Indian languages, including Hindi and English. Further, missions and posts also maintain helplines for emergencies. Twitter Sewa @ MEAMADAD was launched in March 2017 to monitor and respond to grievances received on Twitter (MEA, 2019).

Some of the flagship schemes working under the Government of India are:

- **Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana, 2017:** it covers maternity expenses to women emigrants up to Rs 50,000; legal/financial assistance to Indian women abandoned/cheated/abused by their Non-Resident Indian (NRI)/Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or foreign spouses (up to seven years after their marriage).
- **Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF):** it was set up in 2009 to assist overseas Indian nationals in times of distress and emergency (based on ‘most deserving cases’), emergency evacuation of Indian nationals from conflict zones, natural disasters and other challenging situations, or those in distress while visiting a foreign country. ICWF is extended to all Indian missions and posts abroad. PIOs and overseas citizens of India card-holders are eligible to get help, but it does not provide individual financial support. Ordinarily, only legally entered migrants in the host country are eligible to receive benefits under this fund. However, ‘[i]n cases where it is not so’, assistance may be provided based on the satisfaction of the head of mission/head of post based on the circumstances of the case.

A revised guideline by the MEA covers the following three key areas:

- **Assisting overseas Indian nationals in distress situations:** this includes situations like being stranded abroad, fines for minor crimes for illegal stay in the host country, legal/financial assistance to Indian women abandoned/cheated/abused by their NRI/PIO, transportation of mortal remains, and expenditure on incidentals of deceased Indian nationals to India or local cremation/burial, emergency medical care, accident, etc.
- **Support for community welfare activities (subject to availability of funds):** it includes efforts to promote Indian culture, organizing cultural programmes by recognized Indian diaspora organizations, the celebration of Indian festivals, national days, payment of an honorarium for teachers/faculty teaching Indian languages, art forms, welfare activities for Indian students, redressal of students' grievances such as concerning their visa, residence status, work permit, financial, welfare, etc.
- **Improvement in consular services:** under these schemes, various services are rendered, such as the hiring of additional staff pertaining to schemes/welfare measures; providing consular services; hiring vehicles for prisons, hospitals, morgues and airports on a need basis; hiring of a local interpreter for consular visits; organizing labour camps/consular camps for interacting with Indian migrant workers and providing information about issues related to overseas employment; labour laws; welfare and protection measures of the government; setting up 24 × 7 toll-free helplines, etc.

**International collaboration:** in addition to these policy initiatives, the Government of India has also collaborated with the UN regarding several issues like domestic service workers in 2016–2017. This programme was intended to implement ‘Migration of women domestic workers from India: Building capacities for safe mobility’ for migration pockets of Andhra Pradesh and the Telangana States. It is a technical collaboration intended at the ‘Training of Trainers program’ with two refresher courses on Gender and Safe Migration. Social awareness campaigns were launched to reach an estimated 5000 aspiring migrant women domestic workers at the grassroots level. The idea was to enhance awareness on safe and legal migration abroad and ‘to construct migration cycle of women migrant workers/housemaids and examine the role of different stakeholders influencing their decision to migrate for work/return in mid-way/resettlement, including the role of middlemen/agents’ (MEA, 2019). According to the information available on the MEA website between the years 2017 to 2018, nine ‘Training of Trainers’ (ToT) workshops on pre-departure orientation (PDO) were organized in partnership with IOM and the UN. The ILO is another organization that continually promotes social security programmes and measures. In 1997, the ILO introduced a convention about sexual harassment of women workers at the workplace, which the Government of India has endorsed.

These efforts, though appreciable, are still inadequate, as India, being the highest sender of migrants, needs to call on all countries to develop, ratify and implement comprehensive international legal instruments that promote and protect the rights of migrant women and girls, empower them through skilling and training and promote equality among male and female migrants. An increased understanding of the migration process of women should provide the basis for the formulation of policies and programmes that promote their equality with migrant men and safeguard their well-being. One of the foremost requirements for this is the need for improved data collection.

## Conclusion and analysis

‘Feminization of migration’ is a frequently discussed term nowadays. However, it is also a less understood term as scholars have yet to develop a clear definition of feminization of migration.

Globally there is a shift in women's migration patterns apart from an increase in the numbers. From the traditional role of accompanying the family to migrating independently for job opportunities and becoming the primary breadwinners of the family, women have indeed traversed far and progressed immensely in this regard. The growth of women-specific jobs and the inclusion of gender in the scholarly debate and policy legislation have also increased women's visibility and their status in the migration discourse. These developments also have implications for gender roles and gender relations, yet women are constrained by established societal norms and patriarchal structures.

While women's role in the development discourse has also increased with their increasing earning capacity, it would be premature and unjustified to relate this excitement to something that has led to securing their position in the process of migration. The feminization debate has brought women's issues from the margins to the centre of the migration discourse, but there is much to be done towards their protection and empowerment. Female migrants still experience double discrimination as both migrants and as women in their host country. Moreover, women's migration remains understudied. The conceptual and empirical complexities involved in evaluating the way gender impacts migration are yet to be desegregated. There is a massive paucity of gender-responsive data and tabulation of women in the countries of origin and destination. Moreover, there is limited access to datasets for the public. As a result, migrant women also remain an untapped and under-utilized source for development for their families, home countries and host countries and, above all, for their own empowerment. There is an urgent need for adoption of coherent and standardized statistical standards methodologies and mechanisms and common migration indicators by all the organizations. Only proper data on the economic activity of female migrants, their education level, health status and employment before and after migration, and many other aspects can lead to informed policies that can ensure women's safe, orderly and regular migration and know whether the policies introduced are having the desired effect. International migration should also be included in population surveys, labour force surveys and census questionnaires.

The right approach would be to incorporate women and include them at every stage and in every aspect of migration discourse. It is also important not to homogenize women as one category and investigate specific categories based on country, community, skill and class. This highlights the need to improve research capacity and scope beyond the current focus on stereotypically gendered issues. Contextually relevant research agendas can be set at the national, regional and international levels through consultation with women's groups, policymakers, practitioners and civil society. There is a requirement for more micro-level, phenomenological studies of the everyday reality of women's mobility. Technology can be an enabler in this.

India in this context has taken some significant steps forward towards legislative and policy changes for the protection of migrant women's rights and ensuring their security in the destination countries in terms of employment protection, social security and elimination of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, most of the focus is towards a protectionist mode which is vital, of course, but the focus should also be towards their empowerment and inclusion in the international labour market, and remittance-led development for which women are a reliable source. The other important step could be to regularise the undocumented women migrants whenever and wherever they are found. Majority of the legislations indicate a protectionist attitude from the Indian government rather than an empowering one.

One of the major steps would be to ensure a comprehensive pre-departure training programme for country-specific requirements regarding language, rules and regulations. Another critical step is to upskill women for domestic work, child-rearing, etc. and for all other kinds of jobs to enhance their competitiveness in the labour market. There is also a need to certify their skills and look beyond the traditional sectors and train them in digitally enabled skills as countries worldwide are moving towards greater automation. The issue of overseas workers came up in the third Pravasi

Bhartiya Divas (PBD) conference panel discussion on skill sets of the future Indians in the Gulf, which emphasized overseas training of the workers, wherever they are working (MEA, 2020b). To take this idea further, women migrants can be given special attention in such programmes, which can be implemented through a public-private partnership model. Several Indian institutions/schools have their branches/offices in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which may prove highly beneficial in this regard. It is essential to approach migrant women's issues through a gendered perspective highlighting equality and equity among the sexes. Women's empowerment reconfigures gender relations and bring multidimensional consequences to the social landscape.

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## Notes

1. Indian nationals who possess ECR passports have to obtain emigration clearance if they wish to go abroad for work or employment to one of the 18 notified ECR countries. This includes those who have not passed Class 10. The Government of India can also bring certain occupations into the emigration clearance system, even for those holding Emigration Check Not Required (ECNR) passports.
2. The 18 ECR countries are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria, Lebanon, Thailand, Iraq and Malaysia.
3. This system of Kafala is prevalent in the West Asian countries. Under it, the employer in the receiving country directly recruits the worker from the sending country with complete responsibility for visa and travel, etc. Domestic workers are often employed through Kafala. This system is criticized because the worker is bound by one employer who often confiscates her passport, leaving her powerless to change jobs or report abuse.

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