

# **GENDER AND MIGRATION: NEGOTIATING QUESTIONS AROUND STRUCTURE AND AGENCY<sup>1</sup>**

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Women's migration in India, driven by various factors and motivations, has generally been ignored in Migration Histories for decades. Even when efforts have been made to bring it back into the academic research or policy making discourse, it has invited a variety of opinions and counter arguments from many fronts. The conference was an effort in the direction of understanding the structural dynamics of migration, understanding the role of social policy and legislation to aid the socially vulnerable and to bring into focus the effect of women's migration on social structures like caste, race and gender.

In the introduction to the conference, Dr Carsten Krinn, after welcoming all participants, appreciated the word 'negotiating' in the title of the conference and requested the participants to not just convey their own thoughts on the subject but to also reflect on others' views. He then placed several points, such as the complexities for researching in the area, the critical examination of the upward and geographical mobility granted by the process of globalisation to women and change in the larger scenario as indispensable for

<sup>1</sup> The workshop was organized by School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata under their project titled "Increased understanding of gendering of workers and culture and politics of organisation of workers with special reference to auto-rickshaw drivers and beauty workers in West Bengal" from 22<sup>nd</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2013 in Kolkata

better living and working conditions of the people, as markers for the participants to think about while presenting and dialoguing with each other later.

The session was then handed over to Dr. Samita Sen who in her Keynote Address set the tone for the rest of the conference. She historically situated the process of female migrations in India and posed various facets of a scientific study in the area to the participants. She cited her 2006-07 study and stated that even though a major part of women migration was still marriage-related, more and more female workers are becoming like single male workers, who migrate independent of their families. Their family too gradually adjusts to their absence. In her 2011 study she noted the trend for employing younger women and in her view, if the feminization of labour happened in the 1950s, its juvenalisation is happening now. This new group of migrants also has a different set of concerns as compared to previous migrants.

The first speaker, Ms Sujata Mody, began by giving a brief overview of her work among the migrant workers in NOKIA SEZ, cotton spinning mills and garment workers in Chennai. She spoke about the changing demography of the migrant female workers in her area of work as there is a considerable shift in the choice of employment for women from agricultural and other unskilled work in rural areas to semi-skilled work in the garment factories. She gave a detailed account of the dynamics of the Nokia Special Economic Zone in Chennai and elaborated on the employment processes of women migrant workers and their working conditions in it. Further, with the help of the example of the Cotton Spinning Mills, she illustrated how there is a systematic suppression of minimum wages in such industries and how the lowest wages always go to industries dominated by women.

The next speaker, Mr Ashok Khandelwal, presented his analysis on the 'Feminisation of Agriculture and the Changing Face of Male Migration in the Country'. He began by clarifying his definition of the term 'migration' and defined it, in the context of his paper, as not changing location but rather abandoning old employment for another one. He emphasized that the role of women in agriculture is increasing and agricultural roles such as Land Preparation where women were not dominant earlier are being taken up by women. He lay stress on the fact that this increase is not by choice, neither has it led to women empowerment since it has been caused by the massive agrarian crisis in the country. He criticised the Indian state by saying that its goal to corporatize agriculture and make 75% of the population urban by 2025 was absurd. Instead the government should give more ownership of land to women and concentrate on social welfare schemes. The central concept used by Mr. Khandelwal, namely, 'Feminisation of Labour' faced many questions as the validity of such a term has been much debated given the new research in the area.

Ms Indrani Mazumdar based her paper on her research undertaken at Centre for Women's Development Studies and spoke about 'Some Issues related to Caste and Gender in women's labour Migration'. She began by contextualising the research and said that it was undertaken due to lack of record on female migrant workers who were in a vulnerable position in the society. By citing various data collected during her extensive research she was able to show the participants various dominant patterns in female migration in the country such as a gendered employment crisis given the context of agrarian crisis, volatility in jobs and increase in unpaid labour. Since this sort of comprehensive data on female migration is rare, Ms Mazumdar's research is an important contribution to both academic and policy making processes.



In her interesting paper titled 'Migrating for Marriage: Locating Humanity, Emotion and Agency in Cross- Region Marriages, Dr. Ravinder Kaur explained the recent phenomena of cross regional marriages occurring due to poverty, no dowry, or lack of women in an area. She referred to these brides who travel from regions as far as Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Nepal to the regions of Delhi and Haryana as 'Long Distance Brides'. She gave both the negative and the positive side of this phenomena by talking about stories of abuse and violence but also of affection and radical changes in family structures.

Dr. Parveena Kodoth's paper titled 'Female Breadwinners and the Gender Norm in Kerala: The Case of Emigrant Domestic Workers' dealt with the Political economy of a large section of female Migration in Kerala. She began by explaining the concept of agency and how it works given the context of the Emigrant domestic workers and the prevailing gender norms in Kerala. Through specific case studies Dr. Kodoth was able to illustrate important aspects related to the area such as 'who goes?', 'material contexts of the migrants', 'women's agency', and the 'existing politico-social situation in kerela' She said that they were mainly clustered in specific localities and came from Latin Catholic, Muslim or Hindu SC ST communities. Migrating internationally is also a matter of possessing resources as many women want to migrate but only some manage to do so. The question of 'who goes' is dependent on where a woman is positioned in relation to male provisioning. A breakdown in the provisioning system often helps women to migrate as women moving on their own initiative is rare. Many migrants are driven by a clearly defined aspiration in the beginning but overtime these aspirations also change after migrating as migration opens up diverse trajectories.

The important topic of 'Domestic workers and unionization was addressed by Sister Lissy. She began with the C189 Domestic Workers Convention of the ILO in 2011 and gave a brief summary of its aims and objectives. She further went on to explain the precarious social situation that the domestic workers in India live in. The profession is excluded from many labour laws and hence subjected to much abuse which includes sexual harassment and occupational hazards. She ended by saying that in order to ensure the effective implementation of these policies and improve the living conditions of domestic workers, it was imperative for social activists to organize women's collective and domestic workers unions.

Ms Neelanjana Sengupta concluded the conference by laying down certain important questions and themes discussed in the 2 days. She began with the problem of defining the term 'migrant worker' and set several parameters that had come to the fore during the course of the conference. A migrant maybe defined in terms of the social and/or physical spaces that she occupies. Migrants can be characterised by regions, sectors of work, other social factors like caste, class, gender etc. and the social institutions that mediate their process of migration. Female migrations is also classified as either 'marriage' or 'employment' related. She urged the participants to also try to rethink this difference. A migrant woman may also be defined by whether she is a single migrant or part of a migrant family. Factors in the macro-economic condition of the country also influences migration, for example the agrarian crisis has led to an influx of women in paid domestic work. Another important aspect raised by her was the question of state policy in relation to migrant women workers whether it be social security or minimum wages. The state's portrayal and the common perception of the female migrants is generally as someone 'vulnerable' and destitute and the state devises various measures to restrict her migration. However, migrant women have played a subversive role and sought to change the social and economic stereotypes ascribed to them. She also problematized the question of agency saying that choice to migrate need not be free or rational and



can be mediated by various social, political and economic structures. She ended on a positive note by emphasising the need for struggle and for women across social lines to find collectivity.

A common thread running through most research papers was the “question of agency”. While forming an opinion about the extent of agency that the ‘subject’ of study has, it is important to keep in mind the amount of ‘agency’ we ourselves as researchers are giving to them. In other words, it is important while drawing a pattern in a research, to not end up objectifying the people that we study and to not determine for them the course that they are to follow. Instead, any research should considering deliberating on how it can aid the voice of the people that it studies in such a way that it is heard loud and clear. The conference was a positive step in this very direction and proved to be a beneficial experience for all participants.



#### THE WORKSHOP WAS ATTENDED BY:

**Ashok Khandelwal** Independent Researcher | **Carsten Krinn** Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) | **Praveena Kodoth** Centre for Development Studies | **Ravinder Kaur** Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) | **Indrani Majumdar** Centre for Womens' Development Studies (CWDS) | **Nandita Dhawan** School of Women's Studies | **Nilanjana Sengupta** School of Women's Studies | **Nirmala Banerjee** Formerly associated with Centre for Studies in Social Sciences | **Nguyen Nu Nguyet Anh** Vietnam National University | **Pankhuri Dasgupta** Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) | **Pragya Khanna** Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) | **Ranabir Samadhar** Calcutta Research Group | **Ranjita Biswas** School of Women's Studies | **Rajiv Kumar** Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) | **Samita Sen** Diamond Harbour University | **Sujata Mody** New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) | **Sr. Lissy Joseph** National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM) | **Vinod Koshti** Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) |

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