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Impact of COVID-19 on female migrants in India and policy responses

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Impact of COVID-19 on female migrants in India and policy responses

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has hit human lives in an unusual way, especially in the process of migration. The pandemic has taken umbrage on the livelihood of female migrant workers from irregular sectors, by leaving them completely unpaid. The state-imposed ‘lockdown’ has proved to be a significant ordeal for many migrant women who are repatriating with families. The inadequate government policies failed to make gender-sensitive and inclusive policies that could give exclusive economic growth. The incongruent policies of the host-state and home-state governments have affected the reverse migration process to a greater extent. They have no choice but to step back from the labour market. The registered participation of female workers is a credible solution to this chronic gender discrimination. In this light, the paper seeks to analyse the impact of government policies on the health and livelihood of female migrants at the advent of COVID-19.

Keywords: female migration; COVID-19; gender sensitive policy; labour market; informal sector; repatriation; India.

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1 Introduction

“The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic.”

António Guterres

UN Secretary-General

Migration is a global phenomenon that involves the shifting of people from one place to another. It is both a process as well as the consequence. The outbreak of a virus-induced global pandemic since 2020 has rendered many migrant workers with no jobs to sustain them. Most of the migrants keep on stranding far away from their home. As they

commenced their journey back to the safety of their homes, a large number of people got stranded in the midst of nowhere; while many took to the railway tracts and the state and national highways for a way back, a good number of them got ran over either by goods trains or by running vehicles. In case of women, the situation got worsened as unlike male, female migrants never move without family. The women migrants are worst affected by the recrudescence of corona virus. Factors like – uncertain job, lack of housing, family burden, government’s negligence, delay in repatriation process, physical abuse during the lockdown period has led to much trepidation and trauma to them.

The process of migration is often undertaken in search of job. Factors like gender, political, social, economic and cultural status play a major role in influencing the migration process. The analysis made so far on migration have however, undermined the specific problems afflicting the women migrant labourers. The previous studies on migration over-emphasised on it as a process, and not as a pattern and thus ignored both the practical and specific gender needs in the migration process. The domination of the masculine perspective in the analyses has also excluded the female aspects of migration from its scope resulting in the erosion of women’s exposure to outer world. It simply made them a mere confrère of their husbands. The migration data also were not always gender segregated which hampers the further chances of policy making and research.

The female migrants are the most sensitive and vulnerable groups which remained unnoticed. The vulnerability of women in various work places has long been entrenched in patriarchal society. Women who are working outside dedicate much hardwork and time. Unlike their male counter parts, females are obligated to finish their household chores and then leave for work. However, the contribution of female members in the family remains unnoticed. It is not even counted in Indian GDP. In most of the cases, the female workers do not get due recognition for their economic activities. Most of the women leave their native place and go to other places for livelihood. The study conducted on the migrants in Tamil Nadu, found that 62% of the 800 migrants in urban areas have breastfed their children (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009) but they are not entitled to the conducive working conditions.

Migration does not reflect gender disparity but the data on internal and international migration largely excludes female migrants. According to the World Migration Report (IOM, 2020), women count 48% of the total world migration. The migrants constitute 30% of Indian populations. As per the report of Census (2001), women migrants constitutes 216.7 million out of 307.1 million (70%) whereas male migrants represents only 90.4 million (29.43%) of it. It is to be noted that the COVID-19 has badly affected the informal sector which is mostly dominated by women. According to an estimation of UNDP, Indian industries absorb 100 million migrant workers (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). Hence, the significant contribution of female migrants in Indian economy cannot afford to be overlooked.

The COVID-19 has impacted the whole world but its impact on women is profound due to their vulnerable health condition and overloaded responsibilities (UNO, 2020). The uncertainty over their livelihood has nosedived their condition. Furthermore, under the stress of policy incertitude of the state governments and the central government the condition got worsened. Though the contemporary phase of India highlighted the rights of migrant women with high alert, but the present pandemic situation has sought to silence those voices.

The migrants women, working mostly in unorganised sectors of developing economies put themselves at risks due to their arduous work. The outbreak of the pandemic has undisputedly overlooked the security of the women migrants due to its over emphasis on the escalating spread of the pestilence. The government prohibition on moving as group has further jeopardised the security of the female migrants in the course of their interstate/intrastate transits. Thus, it has become an absolute necessity to analytically comprehend the impact of COVID-19 on women migration.

The paper adopts intersectionality as a method of inquiry to find the impact of COVID-19 on the women migrants in India working in unorganised sector. Secondary data – official records, census reports, reports of UN have been collected to reach to the logical inference of the study.

2 Objectives

The paper proceeds with the following objectives:

- 1 To find the impact of COVID-19 on female migrants.
- 2 To analyse the impact of government policies on the health and livelihood of female migrants at the advent of COVID-19.
- 3 To find the credibility of women's registered participation in Indian labour market.

3 Assumption

The study assumes:

- 1 The COVID-19 hit the migrants across the country where women are more affected than men.
- 2 The government policy for migrants do not have gender specific dimension.
- 3 The deformed masculinity rooted in the migration process has undermined the role of women.

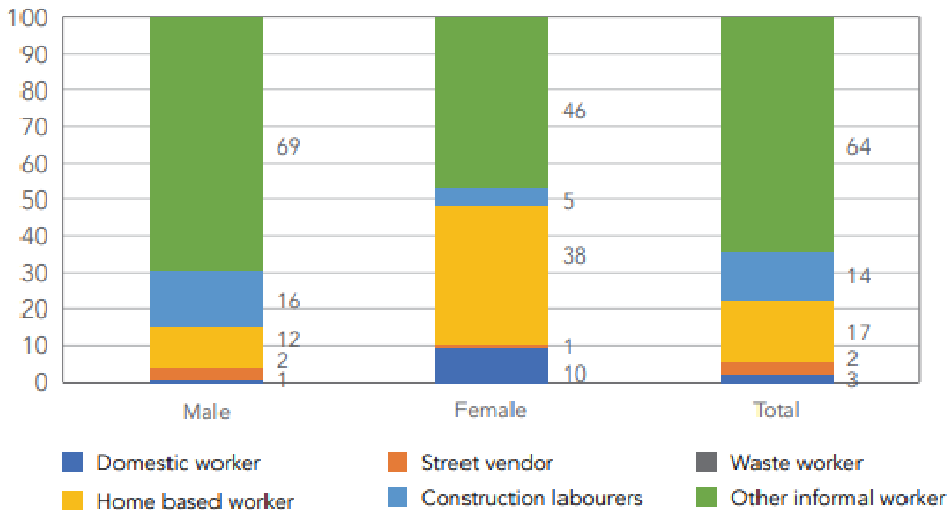
4 Female migrants in India

“Females are more migratory than males” – constitutes the most important part of Ravenstein's law of migration.¹ In India, women constitute 70% of internal migration (UNESCO, 2013). A large section of this internal flow goes to the informal sector.

In India, marriage is the most plausible reason behind female migration. The married women usually go to work in construction sites and kilns along with their husbands who also happen to be the ones who are actually registered even as migrant workers. However women, in general, move from one place to another in search of suitable jobs also. Factors like illiteracy, poverty, family burden are the core issues behind the engagement of women in unregulated and informal sectors. Migrant women are mostly found to be working in restaurants, pubs, brick-kilns, parlours, construction sites, brothels, and

garment and spice factories. The educated young women, on the other hand, work in parlours, pubs and restaurants. Moreover, women who migrate to different cities in search of work, often turn out to be sex workers, working mostly either in brothels or on the streets. Nonetheless, the participation of women in Indian labour market is very low (Mehrotra and Parida, 2017). It has shrunk to 12% as per the latest census report. The most acute reason of poor participation of women is the less payment they get for equal amount of work. However, the gap between the presence of huge number of women migrants and their poor participation in labour market is largely due to various factors like family burden, health vulnerability, tradition that abstain women from going out by the name of culture, low wages, physical abuse, etc. All these factors impede the growth of the constructive female labour force. On the external front, women are also found working as bonded labour, facing physical and mental abuses. In Indian economy, women are mostly considered to be the unregistered labourers. This is the reason that though women are participating in informal sectors in a quite large number but their heads are not counted as wage earners.

Figure 1 Gender specific informal sectors in India (see online version for colours)



Source: IWWAGE

In India, no reliable data on migration is available. It is due to the bereft of proper registration process of the interstate migration. Table 1 suggests that states like Haryana, Maharashtra, Orissa, UP, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh are counting highest numbers of female migrant workers whereas the north-eastern states count very less in this regard. The data shows that the female migration pattern is unevenly scattered in different states. The Census report of 2011 has enumerated the migration data with gender particularity but the data is based on the information collected from the registered workers. The lack of proper regulatory mechanism, i.e., registration system, has deprived the huge labour force in India. The COVID-19 sought to reveal the hidden workforce as huge number of migrants workers were found returning to their native places.

Table 1 Pattern of female migration in India

<i>State</i>	<i>Intra district</i>	<i>Inter-district</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>From other states</i>	<i>From other countries</i>
Central Region					
MP	64.2	25.6	9.8	10	0.08
UP	62	32.3	94.3	5.4	0.35
Northern Region					
Haryana	42.11	41.23	83.3	16.3	0.41
Punjab	50	33.7	83.7	15.8	0.5
Rajasthan	66.9	24.3	91.2	8.7	0
Western Region					
Gujrat	63	28.6	91.6	8.1	0.33
Maharashtra	54.1	30.6	84.7	15.2	0.16
Eastern Region					
Bihar	66.9	27.9	94.8	5.2	0
Orissa	76.1	19.2	95.3	4.7	0
West Bengal	71.9	18.5	90.4	7.1	2.4
Southern Region					
Andhra Pradesh	70.8	22.6	93.4	6.5	0
Karnataka	70	20.5	90.5	9.4	0.11
Kerala	76.4	17.5	93.9	5.3	0.76
Tamil Nadu	58.6	34.5	93.1	6.1	0.83

Source: Household Survey Data of NSSO 5th Round

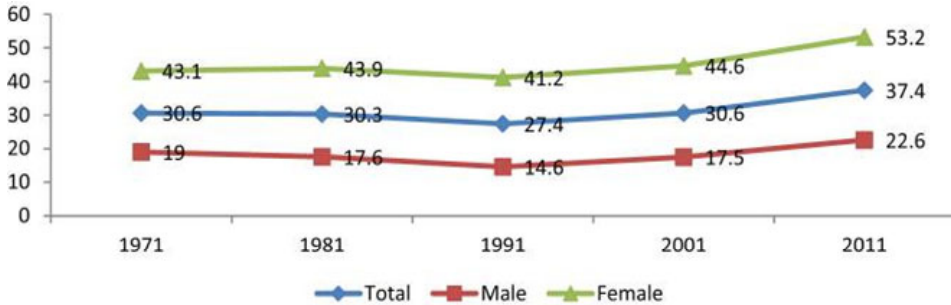
4.1 *Status of female migrants under COVID-19*

While focussing on the pattern of migration, most of the migration theories have overlooked the repatriation process. The challenges posed by COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown sought to unfold the same. The declaration of lockdown disrupted the routined life in an unprecedented manner. Many of the economic sectors saw abrupt closure. As a result, the labour class has been found to be adversely affected. Due to the outspread of the contagion, on one hand and unemployment on the other, the migrants worker started returning to their place. This posed a threat, mostly to the women migrant workers. The pattern of migration shows a credible amount of female migrate to different place. The COVID-19 hits the migration process and condition of female are worsened due to the obvious fact that female run the household chores.

The pandemic has hit the informal sector of economy of the developing countries including India and that will have adverse effect on the female labourers due to their large-scale presence in the field. Most women leave their own place in search of livelihood with their male folks and children. These migrants' women are often subjected to physical and mental abuses. Their condition worsened upon their repatriation during lockdown. Some women migrants died due to long walk, dehydration and hunger; some died under the scorching sun; some gave child birth while walking on the thoroughfare; some had squatted outside the bus and rail stations, some walked head loaded. Many of

them walked with babies on their laps; some pulled wheeled suitcases on highways with toddlers sitting on it. One Bihari girl was found carrying her injured father on cycle carrier. While coming to Satna from Maharashtra a pregnant lady gave birth to a baby on the road. After the birth of the new born, she again walked for 150 km (Pandey, 2020). The same incident occurred in Tamil Nadu also when a migrant lady delivered baby boy while going to her home Chattisgarh from Telengana. Police threats apart, the women migrants and girls suffered from grave deprivation of basic amenities on their way back.

Figure 2 Pattern of female migration (see online version for colours)



Source: Rani (2020)

In another instance, a 25 years old female worker returned to her place Bihar from Punjab with her family. She was bleeding due to her abortion and got admitted to a hospital where she was kept in isolation ward for corona test. In this isolation ward, the lady was raped for two consecutive days, allegedly by the doctors. On 6th April, the lady died due to excessive bleeding (Kumar, 2020). The unfurling affect of global pandemic has halted their life for an uncertain period. Moreover during this lockdown period, the women migrants suffered major financial losses and as a result, were not able to pay their rents and remittances. Due to the lack of money, many girls have to compromise with their employers and house owners. Many female migrants found stranding in Odisha (Ghosh, 2020). These women work in a local textile industry. They requested the local police and the state government to arrange their repatriation. Failing to get a positive response, the women accused the concerned authority. They had also reported that the factory owner has increased their working hours. The north-eastern girls have mostly shifted to South India and Delhi for job. They are mostly abused as ‘Chinky’ due to their distinctive physical features. They have been subject to various denigrating and derogatory treatments (McDuie-Ra, 2012). The restriction of people’s movement from March 25th has scourged them as it made them unpaid and shelters less. The female workers are ill treated and are made bound to work during lockdown. The load of work on one hand and the anxiety of the pandemic, on the other, has jeopardised their condition.

As per the report of World Economic Forum, the pandemic has increased the rate of child marriage in India (Batha, 2020). It is because the study of the school goers was discontinued due to the sudden close down of schools. The loss of jobs has exacerbated the situation. Bemused with poverty and naivety the poor parents pushed for the early marriages of their minor girl child. Now, the propensity of the child marriage was always high in India. But the pandemic situation has aggravated the situation by pushing the minor girls into an uncertain future, leaving them unschooled and lowbrow. The

occurrence of child marriage turned out to be very high among the irregular migrant workers due to their economic vulnerability. Within the span of four months (from April to July, 2020), Karnataka Government issues 107 cases of child marriage.²

Another serious concern is that the female migrant workers often face physical harassment. The lockdown has increased the rape incidents and the female migrants are the mostly gripped with this fatality. The migrants living in the construction sites and slums are more prone to such abuses. *The Times of India* reported that a female migrant labourer was brutally raped in Chandigarh in her own house (Saini, 2020). Moreover, in this halted schedule, the female migrant workers are often exploited by their employers. Due to the lockdown, women labourers, while coming back to their native states were raped. Apart from these registered cases, many unregistered incidents of rape are clamouring. A random interaction with the female returnee in the Barasat, Kolkata revealed the financial and sexual exploitation of the workers in a brick klin in Bihar. The less attention of the government to the migrant workers and mostly the female migrant labourer worsened the condition of migrant women in India.

4.2 Health vulnerability of female migrants during lockdown

It is to be noted that, the socio-economic status of the female migrants also proved to be a major hindrance in their access to health facilities. The myth that 'migrants are COVID infected' accentuated the situation and made repatriation more difficult for them. Migrants also happen to be more prone to the communicable diseases like – tuberculosis, measles, HIV, malaria, hepatitis, etc. especially for the female migrants who are menstruating. During the period cycle, women easily get infected. The pandemic has raised the chance of such pelvic infections to the female migrant who do not take necessary safety measures during their periods. Moreover, having sex without protection imposes severe threat to women's health. The sex without protection let the women to become pregnant frequently. It increases the chances of postpartum diseases amongst the migrant workers. Pregnancy under COVID-19 can experience severe post natal complications leading to maternal deaths. Women faced innumerable post natal complications as well. A wayfarer who gave birth to the baby did not get that care and facilities that she is entitled to get at the post natal stage. It resulted in physical and mental health deterioration of the female workers (Choudhari, 2020). The COVID-19 has also exacerbated the risk of the female sex workers as they are prone to HIV due to the clandestine sex. A substantial amount of female workers leave their home state and get into the sex trade. Those migrant female sex workers, working in various hazardous places cannot even access the health facilities. Irregular workers engaged in healthcare, parlour and food services were however, more prone to the virus due to their frequent exposure to clients. The lockdown posed a serious threat to them as the lack of livelihood has left them with no options other than going back to their home. The state governments initially closed the doors to their natives who have been stranded in other states.

The high degree of anxiety due to the spread of disease on the one hand and joblessness on the other along with the load of debt burden has created serious health issues among the female migrants. Joblessness, hunger, morbidity, fear of losing the near and dear ones are the issues women are concerned about which puts a huge pressure on the mental health (Government of India, 2020b). The COVID-19 has exacerbated the depression amongst the migrant workers.

The media reporting on migrant workers' deadly migration became a masculine narrative and has under-reported immense sufferings, indignities, humiliations and vulnerability of the migrant women and girl children. The media projected the suffering of the female migrants as acts of responsible motherhood with immense will power to protect their helpless children *en route*. But they were vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse all along which caused perturbation among the workers. As the women never moved without children and family, a COVID attack on anyone of them became a woman issue. So the uncertain occurrence of the pandemic has affected the women socially, economically, physically and mentally.

Thus, the Indian economy can be seen to have faced reverse migration. Lack of jobs and resultant remittances have left the women under great pressure to run family without financial support because, complying with Aristotle, the society still believes that women are the statesmen of their house and they are shouldered with the household responsibilities.

4.3 Government policies and its impact on female migrants

The Government of India declared three weeks lockdown from March 25, 2020 onwards to meet the crisis posed by the pandemic. The central government in consultation with the state governments declared total ban on movements across internal and international border. This proved disastrous for the poor and migrant labourers of the country where a very large section of them were the women labourers. As a result, a large number of labourers, who migrated to different states, got stranded in the host states. To curb the misery of the stranded labour force, the government took ad hoc measures and provided 14 days quarantine centres, test facilities, food, water and sanitation. The state governments of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Tripura, for example, had started bus services to chauffeur the natives. The state hospitals opened COVID wards. In Delhi, a 1,000 bedded COVID centre was opened. The doctors, nurses, health workers and police were oriented in service delivery for the COVID patients and in disciplining the common mass. But no government agencies could handle the horde. The women who migrated with their families found it very inconvenient to catch the vehicles with their toddlers. Many female migrants working in unorganised sectors, failed to avail the government facilities because their names were not registered. Hence, with all risks, they started on feet to reach their interminable destinations. The plan of the Finance Minister to give food to the migrant workers without ration card has proved to be far from effective for the women migrants. The public distribution system (PDS) is highly politicised and bureaucratised. Over and above that, most of the women do not hold their ration card as it is mostly kept with the male members of the family. Thus, in the absence of their husbands, the analphabetic women were not being able to access the government food facilities.

On 20th June, 2020 the Prime Minister of India launched the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Yojna – a poverty alleviating scheme – for the poor who came back to their native states during lockdown. Under this scheme, Rs.50,000 crore were earmarked for a few selected states where the flow of migrant workers was very high. Government of India launched 'Workers Helpline' to assuage the affect of pandemic on 12th April. It also setup call centres under the supervision of Ministry of Labour and Employment (ILO, 2020). The migrant workers were asked to access those facilities through e-mail and Whatsapp by

using their smartphones. Unfortunately, the women working in irregular fields could not access the government facilities because 20% of the women migrant workers were less likely to use smartphone services (UNDP, 2020). The social and customary practices also proscribed women from using mobile phone and thereby making them digitally challenged. All these schemes proved to be futile as it did not earmark any special provision for the under-privileged migrant women. This widened the traditional gender disparity and the social policy of India was not sensitive enough to the unregistered women migrant labourers. It reveals the flaws of the policies in addressing the distress of undocumented women migrant. The policies thoroughly failed to provide social and economic security to the women returnee while overlooking the health and security needs of the migrant women.

The frequent lockdown in various states has also worsened the condition of the migrant returnee. It imposed halt in the movement, thereby reducing the chance for earning livelihood. The Rural Development Ministry has declared MGNREGA as an essential scheme which will be continued during this period and for that, in 2020–2021, the ministry allocated 64,000 crore for the development of the scheme, however, the incurred expenditure already crossed the margin as it costs 86,933 crore in the same financial year (Tewari and Pandey, 2021). Fund had been raised to meet the employment need of the migrant returnees. But to a great dismay, the workers at the rural areas are getting few solacing jobs, under MGNREGA but those who work at the urban areas are not getting any of such sources of earning. Moreover in various states of India, only men are availing jobs under MGNREGA, excluding the women from the loop. Furthermore, the payments under MGNREGA is comparatively less and mostly irregular. As a result, the workers are going back to the big cities in search of job. Moreover, the second phase of ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan’ planned to give rationing and housing to the migrants who came back to the town (PIB, 2020). It will approximately target 8 crore people. The success of the schemes depends entirely on the proper registration of the irregular labourer devoid of which will doom the scheme.

The Constitution of Indian devised many provisions for the development and empowerment of women in India. The Directive Principles of State Policy (*Art. 39*) allows the state that”

“The citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; equal pay for equal work for both men and women; health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength.”

It also mentions maternity relief, living wage, and decent standard of life, improvement of public life. However, all these privileges are mostly reserved for the workers of organised sector where the workers are more prone to access the government facilities.

Various statutory provisions like – Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 Payment of Wages Act (1936), Minimum Wages Act of 1948, Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (1979), Employees State Insurance Act (1948), the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), Trade Unions Act (1926), Maternity Benefit Act (1961) and Industrial Disputes Act (1947) are, on the other hand, offered to the female migrant workers. But the lack of information and the dearth of substantial registration system have made these efforts ineffectual.

It is to be noted that, the Wage Code 2019 and the Draft Rules 2020 have been devised by the central government with a view to reform and strengthen the labour codes. As per the anticipation of the government, the act, once implemented will assure the social security of the wage earners. But the same law is found prejudiced due to its discriminatory approach towards women, i.e., gender insensitivity. The draft has ignored the domestic work (reproductive and care work) of the women. The act even paid no heed to the health issues of the women. The period of menstruation of working women is not duly addressed. The act has also drawn a ceiling to the consumption of the calorie of the wage earners being completely oblivious to the fact the women needs more calories for their daily tasks. The Chapter 3 of the Gazette has sanctioned one rest day in a week and allowed 26 days payment of wages (Government of India, 2020a). Moreover, with the pandemic running its course, it is highly probable that the leave of the wage earners will not be considered.

The state governments took numerous initiatives on the ground of providing job security to the migrant workers. Bihar is one of the states providing various schemes for migrants including jobcards, food from rationing system and livelihood under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 or MNREGA schemes. The different state governments are adopting different plans for the migrants.

However, the government policies did not focus on gender sensitive policies targeting the huge number of female work force. Kerala consecutively tops the list when it comes to implementing migration policies followed by Andhra Pradesh, reported by Interstate Migrant Policy Index (2020). The state also offers lucrative wages to the labourers compared to the other states, so much so that, it becomes the ideal destination for the migrants in India. Since 2017, the Kerala Government has been offering the Awaz Health Insurance Scheme to the migrant workers, covering 15 thousand accident benefits and up to 2 lakh death coverage. This government also introduced unique and easy registration through ADHAR card. All these fascinating migration policies have made the state a safe shelter for the migrants.

When it comes to policy response towards migrant labourers, the name of the Maharashtra Government comes first. The Government of Maharashtra has provided free health checkups and counselling to the migrants. The Labour Department has provided financial aids and Shramik train services for the registered migrants (Balan, 2020). Other than Maharashtra, states like Haryana, Jharkhand Bihar has also taken active step to provide health and financial assistance to the migrant labourers. But due to the lack of awareness and complication, involved in accessing those facilities women mostly deter themselves from those policies.

4.4 Analysis

The social welfare principle of India has been entangled between profit optimality and social responsibility where the demand of profit lays hold on social welfare. The increasing use of smartphones for accessing civil supplies not only left a large section of migrants, especially women out of the rationing loop but also indicates government's ardent contribution in smartphone markets. It shows that in the field of eerie public-private nexus the citizen of a welfare nation have to pay for getting minimum amount of social assistance from their government due the overactive market economy.

The vulnerability of women during COVID-19 has crossed the ‘Pareto optimality’ level.³ The government has failed to address the very crucial and pertinent factor like women migrants. The patriarchal structure has already subverted the women participation in economic life. The pandemic situation has pushed it into the next level of Pareto optimality where too much stress on giving financial support to migrants has jeopardised the security and health issues of women migrant workers. As per the census report of 2001, out of 65.4 million female migrants, 42.4 million cited marriage as the reason behind migration. It shows the huge bulk of 23 million female workers migrant participate in labour market which is quite good in number, compared to the European markets. The sudden outbreak of the pandemic posed a serious threat to the market. In order to meet the economic crisis, the government should try to employ those female pseudo workers who work more than their male counter parts. For that, the migration governance has to be flexible enough to embrace the gender specific plans for of the migrant workers:

- Replacing the rule of thumb, women migrant workers should be placed for a work where they are best suited.
- It requires the gender specific policy for the women. In the various poverty alleviation schemes of Government of India, women need at least 30% representation. The government policies should focus on the apposite security and health issues of the women workers.
- Establishment of migrant cell in every state
- Government should work on giving job cards to the individual migrant workers. For that, the local bodies should be engaged.
- Through NGOs, the health facilities should be provided to the female migrant workers including the sex workers who are returning back to their state.
- Maternity relief and benefits, perinatal leave for the workers of both organised and unorganised sector should enabled at both public and private sectors. A concrete and registered employment of women would enable them to access maternity relief and other health related benefits.
- Government should ensure social security plans for the female migrant workers based on their age and skill, as prescribed in Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008.
- Each state should consider of having mobile health clinic for the migrants and mobile inspection team for the security of the female migrants who are returning to their home.

The structured government programs and systematic allocation of the schemes for women, considering the gender specificity can ensure the greater productive participation of women in labour market in this pandemic situation. But the government of a country with almost largest number of migrant workers could not produce official data in Loksabha on migrant workers. The response of the governments to the health and livelihood of the female migrants has pushed them towards more vulnerability. The migrant workers who returned back to their native land during the lockdown are going

back to the host states in search of work ignoring the trepidation of COVID-19 but the shuttered doors of the host states disappointed the hopes.

5 Conclusions

Migrant workers are the backbone of the economy of the country, out of which 70% are women, whose work contribution remains unrecognised. Now that they were returning home due to the COVID pandemic, the credibility of public policy and efficiency of the state in handling the practical and strategic needs of the women migrant labourers have come under the scanner. As such, the reverse migration had a noticeable impact on the country's economy and society. It has widened the gap between demand and supply of labour force, increased the inflation rate, halted the gross domestic product due to the lack of workforce, led to a yawning gap in gender inequality and subordinated the women in the labour pool in the country. It increased both the reproductive and care works of women at both organised and unorganised sectors. Such a situation warrants gender sensitive policies so that no migrant women workers remain underpaid and unnoticed.

In this regard, the Government of India took different initiatives for the unregulated working class – farmers and the migrant returnees. But as a rule of thumb, these policies did not focus on the need of the targeted groups. The *first* loophole of the government policies is the lack of uniformity, i.e., the policies are asymmetrically dispersed in the states having highest migrant returnee, ignoring the other parts of the country. The *second* flaw found in the policies is the mere projection instead of its practical use as these hi-tech policies are hardly accessible by the poor migrants. The *third* and most prominent chink in the policies is lack of gender particularity. These policies did not address the large number of women labour force in informal sector of the country. No special transportation has been provided to the women migrants who got stuck in their workplace. No health facilities have been introduced to the pregnant women who walked miles to reach in their destination during lockdown. The large number of unregistered women migrants has made those policies substantially inefficacious. The ad hoc nature of welfare measures for migrant women labour is a cognisable fact. They remained excluded from the PDS loop as they did not have access to smartphone markets promoted by public-private partnership. This deprived them of the public distribution system. While the vulnerability of women migrant workers increased progressively during COVID-19, the Indian states failed to address their crucial problems. The engagement of large labour pool of women in informal sectors can meet the demand of this plummeting economy. At this pandemic situation, the most dispensable duty of the government is to give due attention to the female migrant workers, the most vulnerable social and economic groups. At the below poverty line, the health awareness of the people is very less. The female member of the family is well connected to the other family members. Government's initiative for women will help in impeding the spread of the virus.

For majority of the migrant women worker, under the special context of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, special policy package should be announced and implemented in the real spirit. The government fiscal packages should ensure greater gender assurance by entrenching the participation of women in informal sectors.

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Notes

- 1 Ravenstein's law of migration is one of fundamental studies in the field of migration. In 1885, Ravenstein identified the principles of migration based on his observation in the UK (see <http://www2.harpercollege.edu/mhealy/migrat/xp/mgraven.htm>).
- 2 See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/sharp-rise-in-child-marriages-in-karnataka-during-covid-19-lockdown-6573188/>.
- 3 Pareto optimality is the point of saturation of an economy where market completion is very high. In this case, the competition in the market has become so inflated that mere practical assistance of the government to the migrant workers can dismantle the private-public nexus.