

**Migrated Female workers in the construction industry; examining  
issues and challenges in Udupi district of Karnataka**

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*Construction industry is the most prominent sector in the coastal districts of Karnataka. It forms the platform for the survival of many other support industries and related firms. Labor, as such has become an integral component of construction industry without which the construction industry would be failing to deliver the service and related output. As this industry is labor-intensive, mammoth manpower is inevitable to carry out the operations related to the construction and the like. Many of the skilled labor is absorbed from the local labor market to carry out specialized work such as masonry, painting, carving, plastering, and many more. However, unskilled labor requirements such as loading and unloading, removing debris, assembling and breaking barricades, assisting the skilled workers etc. are taken care by migrated labor from nearby districts of the state as well as out of state. Out of this migrated labor, the role of female workers is prodigious in supporting the construction industry in the coastal districts of Karnataka. With a very petty and nominal wage rate per day and limited benefits offered, these migrant female workers are exposed to many vulnerabilities at work place. The sight of them head loading construction items and carrying bricks is common in almost every worksite. The welfare measures that ensure the well-being of these migrant female workers are also bare minimum. This effect can not only be seen in the workplace but also their personal life where the female worker tries to have a right balance as a family member who is also sometimes the bread-earner of the household. She has to play multiple roles such as a daughter, a spouse, a mother, a daughter-in-law and so on during many occasions. To add to her existing woes domestic violence and workplace harassment has increased at an alarming rate which deters the growth of these migrated female workers both personally and professionally. And the result of this is reflected in their status, lifestyle, health, and financial conditions. There are a lot of schemes and measures to take care of the welfare of migrant female workers, initiated by the Government. But the benefits, rarely reach this deprived segment. Generally, the female labor is characterized as the most vulnerable segment in the society and when the same labor is exposed to the external conditions, they pose issues and challenges for these migrant female workers.*

Keywords: migrant female workers, workplace, harassment, work-life-balance, status, vulnerable.

**Introduction:**

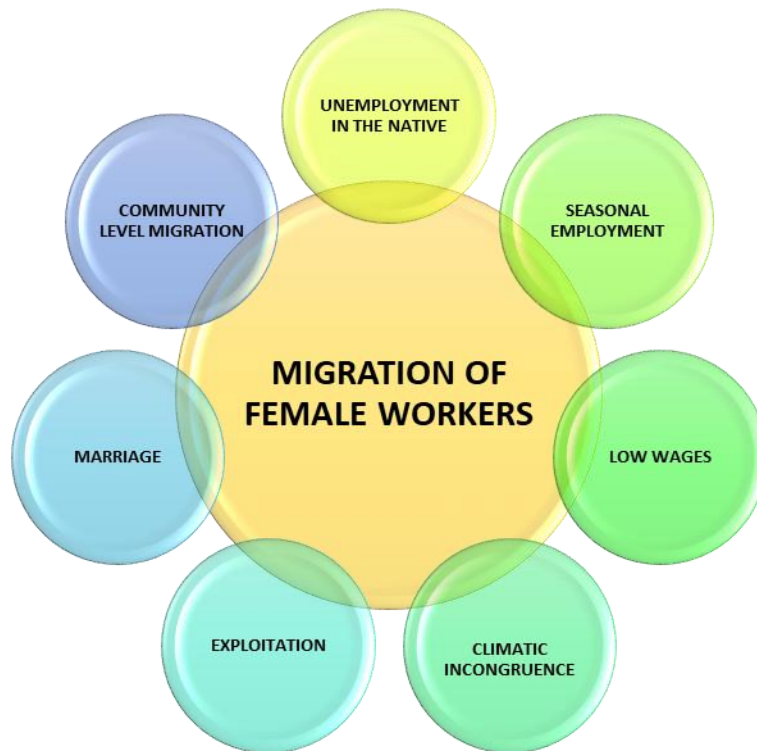
Construction industry in the coastal region of Karnataka is the most promising sector in terms of economic growth and development. Many support industries like manufacturing, petroleum, transport, electrical, chemical, banking, and finance etc. are also dependent on the construction industry for their endurance. The interdependence of these industries helps in the overall attainment of the ideal business conditions throughout the region. This rapid and fast growth of the industry has resulted in the migration of the labor workforce from rural to urban areas and the contribution of such migrants is phenomenal. While the male labor takes responsibility of the skilled job requirements the female labor takes care of the unskilled and related job requirements. Female migrants who accompany their spouse and family in most of the cases continue to get attached to the system contributing their equal might to the construction industry. The female migrant workers also are a major support to the other operations in the construction sites where their absence can lead to the slowdown of the project. The role performed by them like head loading, cleaning, supplying materials, filling water, concrete-mixing etc. even though looks basic and simple, the efforts they put to the work and their commitment levels are worth mentioning. Menial and basic jobs which are turned down by the male workforce are enforced on the female workers who have to take up these low-profile jobs which otherwise will not leave them with any opportunity to take up the work leading to unemployment. With a noble intention of earning a morsel and to support the family, these migrant female workers take up the different laborious task at the workplace assigned by their superiors. In comparison to yesteryears, the worksites and construction projects have transformed into a pressure cooker situation these days as the completion schedules and deadlines are becoming more and more stringent. As a result, the migrant female workers are under tremendous stress as their commitment to work is also challenged. Since most of the migrant female workers have multiple roles to play, both in their personal life as well the occupational life, dedication at work becomes challenging most of the time. To make the situation worse there is the exploitation of the migrant female workers at the workplace which includes lack of facilities, poor work conditions, wage discrimination, workplace harassment, and many more. The female migrant workers also have to survive the

adversity of their male counterparts being considered for more jobs as they come under the skilled category. Even though these conditions persist, the inflow of female migrant workers from the rest of the places in and around is increasing which is an indicator that there is surprising attraction from rural areas to urban areas.

### **Migration of Female workers- Theoretical background**

The majority of the migrated female workers in the construction industry are individuals from lower class, tribal areas and backward regions. They migrate to urban and sub-urban areas in order to enhance their economic and social status. Even though, most of the female migration originates from accompanying the spouse to the workplace several other motives are critical in deciding the migration (Figure1). Today the migrant female workers are not only the major source in supporting the household activities but also are independent individuals standing strong in the society creating their own permanent impression.

**Figure 1: Motives behind migration**



Unemployment in the native:

The rural areas though are the most decent and peaceful places to live, they fail to generate employment opportunities. Lack of infrastructure and facilities do not provide any scope for commercial activities. The male workforce somehow manages to work for domestic work as gardeners and caretakers. On the contrary, the migrant female workers have no source of income and are forced to stay back at home with an unemployed status:

“We have seen days where in spite of owning acres of agricultural land, we could not produce anything in the fields because of poverty. The land was lying idle and we were sitting jobless at our respective houses.”

- *Jayamma, 43 years old, migrant from Bagalokot*

#### Seasonal employment:

Though the rural areas have plenty of natural resources and flora-fauna there is no guaranteed employment throughout the year. Most of the migrant female workers who work on the farm as helpers to support their male counterparts have to remain unemployed during the off-season when there are no agricultural activities. Most of the crops are grown in a seasonal pattern leaving the agricultural plot vacant without carrying out any farming activities.

#### Low wages:

The migrant female workers who with great difficulty find some source of income to support themselves and their family are compelled to work for very fewer wages which range from Rs. 100 to Rs. 150 maximum. Even with these limited wages that are paid, the work extracted is massive and gigantic. Sometimes the wages are not in cash but are rewarded in form of kind like a part of the produce from the agriculture. In worst cases, the female workers have to work for no wages or reduced wage rate to set-off their debt against the loan or advance taken by the family members.

#### Climatic incongruence:

The rural areas of the state suffer from tremendous climatic imbalance. Both summer and rainy seasons both which occur in extreme conditions, bother the rural population severely. During summer, the heat is unbearable and problems like acute temperature and shortage of water arises, posing various challenges like famine and drought. During extreme raining conditions, there are

floods and the entire village gets washed away forcing the rural workforce to move to safe zones with a stable climate to safeguard their and their family's lives and assets.

Exploitation:

The migrant female workers in extreme cases manage to find some petty jobs like domestic-work, helpers in the fields, and any other unskilled routine work. As they are weak compared to the male segment in the society, they are harassed both physically and mentally by the landlords and the village bureaucrats which is another strong reason why the female workers migrate to urban areas:

“Working at domestic houses is very risky. One of the houses where I was working the owner of the house poured hot water on my hands, for not cleaning the floor properly. Even my sister had a similar experience in one of the houses where she was beaten black and blue for asking additional 100 rupees for the festival.”

- *Leela, 40 years, migrant from Vijayapura.*

Marriage:

This is the most common reason why females migrate, because of which the female separates from her parental household and joins her spouse. Usually, the migration due to the wedlock happens from rural to rural but the lack of socio-economic resources in the native force the couple to move on in search of greener pastures to make a decent living. Migrating from the rural area to the urban area though comes as a sudden change, the female worker starts accepting and embracing the new transition:

“I was married to a distant village in Gulbarga, and hardly did I ever imagine that I will land up here. This is a totally new system for me compared to the village where I was born and brought up and my husband's native. Though things are different, people are new adjusting here is inevitable.”

*Girija, 32 years, migrant from Dharwad.*

Community-level migration:

Usually the migration from rural areas to urban areas is restricted to a single-family. But in particular communities like the Banjara (nomadic) community of Lambanis in Karnataka, who move together in groups the migration of the female workers involves at a macro level i.e.

migration along with the entire community. This type of migration is the outcome of the socio-cultural orientation that a particular community has been following:

“I had to migrate to this place, as the entire family including relatives decided to relocate. Staying back alone in my native would not be possible as I would be left alone with my children without any economic source.”

- *Amaramma, 37 years, migrant from Lingsur (Raichur district)*

### **Study Design:**

For the purpose of the current study, primary data was collected with interactions and interviews with 70 female workers who had migrated to work in the districts of Udupi from neighboring districts like Bijapur, Gadag, Kalburgi, Haveri, Dharwad, Bagalkot and other districts of the state. The study was conducted between December 2019 and early March of 2020, when the construction activities were in peak. The survey of migrant female workers in the construction industry was carried out at different sites in the district where the workers stay in temporary shelters built by the contractors. Due to round the clock construction schedule, it was difficult to get access to the migrant workers. Hence a convenience sampling approach was used and the information was collected from such female migrant workers who were willing to offer their response and time to respond to the various queries that were raised in the interaction. Only migrant female workers who had stayed in the district of Udupi for more than one year were considered for the study. The various responses were then recorded and suitable interpretation was arrived at which are quoted in the following section of this paper.

### **Issues and challenges- An overlook**

It's a well-known fact that the construction industry is mostly dependent on migrant workers, especially female workers in particular to carry out regular operations. However, they have to face many challenges during the course of work (Figure 2) as the work schedules are not permanent and these migrant female workers are employed as casual or daily wage workers.

### **Figure 2: Challenges of post-migration**



Working in these informal and unorganized sectors, implies that there is no guarantee and anticipation of the future as the work lacks job security. Work timings are not fixed, and there is always a threat of being detached from the job. The biggest drawback to these female workers is the absence of a job contract that denies access to employee benefits such as welfare and safety measures. For the majority of the respondents' work begins at 8:00 am and extends till 5 pm and 6 pm. On an average these migrant female workers slog for 8 to 10 hours with minimal breaks between work. Every migrant female worker works for approximately 20 -25 days in a given month earning Rs 300 to Rs. 350 per day. The migration to the urban areas from rural areas with great expectations and desires fade away with the challenges and issues prone to the dark side of the construction industry.

#### Wage discrimination:

The economic distribution at the workplace is uneven. There is a huge imbalance in the fixation of wages. The study revealed some strange practices of wage payment one of them which was reduced and negotiated wage for regular workers. It was found that the migrant female workers who are provided regular and stable employment say continuously for 15 to 20 days in a month are given a reduced daily wage than that of those migrant female workers who are occasionally hired for 5 to 10 days in a month. Sometimes the wages are combined with that of accompanying male members who could be either their spouse, brother, or father as the case may be. A pair of male and female worker is paid around 850 rupees out of which the female has to accept whatever is distributed by the male counterpart:

“We are a group of 4 females usually helping the mason in filtering sand, supplying cement mix and later cleaning the area. The male worker equivalent is paid around 500 Rupees individually, while 4 of us have to share 1000 rupees altogether. We cannot demand or bargain for more



wages as it will not have any impact on the contractor and there could be a possibility that this job will be passed on to some other group who are ready to work a lesser amount probably for 900 rupees”

- *Paramma, Hiradevi, Mamatha, and Sheela, all four migrants from Bellary*

#### Working conditions:

The ongoing construction projects which yield beautiful structures in the future are marred by so many unhealthy and unsafe work practices in the stages of construction. Absence of drinking water at the workplaces forces the migrant female workers to depend on tap water which is available nearby. There are no proper toilets for the migrant female workers, who are forced to use corners and open spaces for their needs. The absence of proper washing and drying facilities at the workplace force the females to carry the dirty clothes back to their shelters.

“During the extreme summer, we have to toil hard as there is no roof at the construction site. The rainy season is still worst as we have to get drenched in the rains and perform the work. If we try to take a break the supervisor comes from nowhere and abuses us openly which is very embarrassing. What is more disheartening is that they don’t respect the gender neither the age.”

- *Tarabai, 47 years, migrant from Raichur*

#### Illness and accidents:

Construction projects in the urban areas release a lot of dust and smoke due to the various mechanized processes. As there are no safety gears like masks, gloves, and ear-plugs provided to the workers at work site the female migrant workers, in particular, are exposed to such grime at the workplace. Body aches, muscle sprains, ligament tear, cuts on the hands, skin irritation are the common ailments these migrant female workers face in routine. Workplace accidents like falls, tripping on the floor go unnoticed as there are no measures to prevent such mishaps.

#### Workplace harassment:

Migrated female workers though are in the close connect between their family and community, the majority of them have complained about physical harassment and verbal use by the superiors. A section of the migrant female workers has also experienced sexual harassment at the

workplace through abusive language, gestures, unwanted touching, and remarks most of the time by co-workers and the superiors. This information was very difficult to extract as the migrant female workers were reluctant to open up their grievance due to fear of losing their job along with that of their spouse and relatives.

Zero-Savings:

The female worker who does more physical work as compared to her male counterpart fails to derive the right wage at the end of the day. Her daily income is just sufficient to meet the family's needs and wants. Whatever is earned on a particular day she hands it over to her spouse who again will spend it on the household or waste it on drinking or other social evils. She hardly gets to spend anything on herself and even if she wants to spend she has to unfold her hands with her house for money. After slogging from morning till evening she is not even in a position to save a single rupee for her or her child's development.

Health deterioration:

Since most of the migrant female workers are involved at work from morning till late evening, there is hardly any time to take care of their personal needs. Since she has multiple roles to play both at the workplace and home, the same routine is repeated as once she reaches home from the construction site. She has to clean, cook, and wash the food arrangements and after completing the daily chores, it's time that she prepares for the next day. The intake of nutritious food is also a question mark as she is the last one to eat after all the members have their food and has to consume whatever is leftover. In between all this, her health is totally neglected by all the members of the family including her spouse and this leads to many serious health disorders like joint pain, backache, diabetes, high blood pressure etc.

Conclusion:

The migration of the migrant female workers to urban areas has been for employment purposes. This study has aimed to understand the various dimensions of migration and the related impact on the lives of migrant female workers in the construction industry. Analyzing both pre-migration and post-migration issues the study has revealed a mixed outcome wherein there is a dual effect of migration. One positive evidence suggests that the movement of the migrant female workers to the urban set up has made them independent, equivalent to men when it comes

to supporting the family and there is a tremendous improvement in the living conditions. The migrant female workers who had seen only the traditional values and norms that prevailed in a joint family system are now getting familiar with the nuclear family system. They have familiarized themselves with the nuances of the urban lifestyle and they can be seen moving around in the markets like any other ordinary female. At the same time, another aspect that the study has revealed is heart-touching in terms of providing empowerment to these migrant female workers in the construction industry. Though there is a lot of advancement and changes that have taken place in the socio-economic status of the migrant female workers post-migration, she still takes the back seat when it comes to decision-making in the family. The autonomy that has given the earning power to these migrant female workers disables her to take any financial decisions. The income that is earned is handed over to the family head leaving her with 'zero savings' in her hand. Even though, there are numerous legislations and welfare schemes that ensure the wellbeing of migrant female workers at the construction site the exploitation of the migrant female workers is continuing at an increasing rate. Most of the cases go unnoticed as the female workers fear losing the job and embarrassment at the workplace. In spite of all these setbacks that they suffer, the female workers wish to continue in this occupation. They feel that the regular wages in the urban areas are far better than irregular income from domestic work and agricultural produce in their native. It is very important for the regulatory bodies to respond to the feelings of these migrant female workers and frame policies for the fair and just treatment just as it is done for other occupations in the society.

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