



Intersectional Vulnerability in the Informal Labor Market: A Gendered Analysis of Migrant Women Worker in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

In India, informal employment is an important proportion of women labor, especially amongst the migrant communities whereby the structural inequalities of gender, caste, class and migration status overlap to aggravate socio-economic precarity. This paper examines the concept of intersectional vulnerability within the informal labor market by using a gendered perspective of migrant women workers in Odisha. The migrant women workers in Odisha are largely clustered in low-paying, unstable, and labor-intensive jobs in construction, household work, brick kilns, agriculture and small scale manufacture. The paper is based on intersectionality framework and focuses on how multiple forms of marginalization can be used to understand how they influence their labor experiences and the everyday vulnerabilities. The results demonstrate that migrant women encounter dual productive and reproductive workload with low bargaining and an increased risk of abuse and gender-related violence. Informal labor and patriarchal rules also help to keep the work of women invisible, which perpetuates economic dependency and social marginalization. This paper claims that the existing labor and migration policies do not sufficiently cover the overlapping vulnerabilities of migrant women working in the informal sector. The study presents the existence of intersectional inequality in informal labor



markets by forecasting the lived reality of migrant women workers and suggests equal and fair labor governance.

1. Introduction

Migration of labor has been among the survival tactics of the economically marginalized communities in India. In states like Odisha, where poverty has been a constant problem, with agrarian distress, and a lack of industrialization, migration, both seasonal and permanent, has become a part of the livelihood. Migration although being represented as a gender neutral phenomenon still remains highly gendered, constructing and being constructed by patriarchal norms, division of labor market, and unequal power structures. The informal labor market is the most common place where migrant women in Odisha get employment opportunities and characterize by irregular work, no contracts, meager wages and lack of social security. Women migrant workers are yet to be seen in labor data and policy frameworks although their numbers are increasing at an alarming rate. Their vulnerabilities cannot be perceived merely in the context of gender, but they occur at the point of gender, caste, class, migration, and regional disadvantage intersection. The paper aims at investigating the notion of intersectional vulnerability when it comes to migrant women in the informal labor market in Odisha. It posits that the experiences of these women are informed by various and intersecting fields of inequality which exacerbates exploitation and exclusion. The proposed study is offer a more refined view of the reproduction of gendered and social hierarchies through informal labor systems by considering the intersectional feminist approach.

2. Literature Review

The involvement of migrant women in informal labor market has cut across several pieces of scholarly investigation, such as gender studies, migration studies, labor economics, and development studies. There has been an increasing amount of literature that documents the role of informal employment as a location of economic necessity as well as structural disadvantage, disproportionately impacting women throughout the Global South and especially in India.

Sahu and Behera (2025) the authors gave more emphasis on research on women in informal labor markets which explains the high representation of women and low protection and security. Researchers hold that informal employment is usually devoid of labor contracts, social security and regulatory protection and therefore of necessity precarious and disproportionately impacting women, who constitute a large portion of this workforce given the limited access to formal jobs. Women in informal sector face wage differences, unstable employment as well as unsafe working environment, which have their



contribution to the gender inequity and labor markets. Some of the researchers also highlight the worsened predicament of women in informal work. Such ones are the low wages, excessive number of working hours with no paid leaves and limited social security benefits like maternity leave, pension or health insurance. The fact that women are clustered in areas such as the domestic work, home based piecework, street vending, and care labor also adds more to their vulnerability due to the fact that they are poorly acknowledged in society and legally uncovered.

Mapping the vulnerability of migrant women in the informal sector, a qualitative exploration in Dhaka city (2023) that Gender does not entirely define the vulnerability, but instead gender intersects with other social stratifiers like caste, class, and migration status to influence the results of labor. Intersectionality theory emphasizes the resultant disadvantages that these axes of identity create layers of disadvantage that migrant women are more vulnerable to than the rest. Indicatively studies conducted in urban settings (including Dhaka) have revealed that migrant women do not just deal with economic difficulties, but also social stigma, cultural hindrances and harassment, which intersect with their migrant and female identity.

Kumar, P. (2024) defines Scholarship on migration and informal work is yet another issue that addresses the influence of internal migration on the labor experience of women. Migrant women prefer getting into low-waged informal jobs as they do not have many opportunities in their home countries and family needs them to work and earn an income. Although migration may create income-earning opportunities, it also places women in a precarious situation, reduced access to any welfare schemes, and isolation of other people in destinations.

Other researchers emphasize the agency of migrant women, according to which engaging in informal employment may result in larger social networks, resilience, and sometimes even increase bargaining power in families and communities. However, this promise is restricted by structural differences that still do not allow women to obtain dignified and safe jobs (2025).

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the gendered aspects of vulnerability of migrant women against informal employment.
2. To understand how these intersectional forces like caste, class, migration status, and regional underdevelopment influence the labor between women.
3. To determine the efficacy of law and policy frameworks in place to address the vulnerability of migrant women workers.



4. To write about coping mechanisms, resistance and agency forms embraced by migrant women in Odisha.

4. Research Methodology

The research is based on qualitative and descriptive approach. Intersectionality Theory and political economy of women/ gendered bodies is used to realize how caste, status of migration, class works in interaction, leading to diff levels & forms of laboring experiences amongst migrant women. The research is based on secondary data, government reports, and the available empirical literature to analyze the problems associated with wage discrimination, job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, non-availability of legal protection, and limited access to social security programs. The study also deploys a case-based analytical mechanism to interrogate informal sector patterns of exploitation, discrimination and precarity. The framework gives a holistic understanding of the multi-layered and structural nature of vulnerability among women migrant workers.

5. Conceptual Framework: Intersectionality and Informal Labor

Employing intersectionality as an analytical tool is the initial part of the topic I wish to address. The idea of intersectionality initially theorized as Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights that oppression systems like patriarchy, casteism, and class exploitation and inequality as a region are not independent but combine to cause specific types of disadvantage. The intersectionality can be applied in the context of labor to go beyond the single explanations of exploitation and emphasize the impacts of various identities on access to work, wages, and protection. To migrant women workers in Odisha, gender intersects with Caste and tribal identity, especially of Adivasi and Dalit women. Vulnerability in the case of migrant women workers in Odisha is not only determined by gender but rather by the combination of various structural inequalities that only lead to a state of continued precarity. Gender functions in combination with caste, class, migration status, and informality, forming a complex system of disadvantage, which imbalancedly targets women who are involved in informal labor market. To start with, caste and tribal identification is a key factor that defines the nature and terms of employment that migrant women can have. A large percentage of migrant female workers in Odisha are of Dalit and Adivasi descent, traditionally discriminated against socially, evicted of their land and limited access to education and resources. These are the identities that restrict women to the lowest levels of the labor market including construction, brick kilns, domestic jobs, agriculture, and other jobs that involve scavenging. Social status and caste discrimination make gendered exploitation worse and women are left vulnerable to low wages, risky working conditions, and stigma. In the case of Adivasi women more specifically, relocation by mining



and industrialization, and environmental pollution has added to the reliance on migrant labor thereby cutting off the traditional livelihood systems. Then, poverty and class are some of the potent agents of distress migration. The inability to secure local jobs, debt, agrarian distress and chronic poverty force women to migrate in a bid to find survival and not economic progress. It is not a voluntary and empowering type of migration. Rather, women join exploitative labor contracts where they work excessively, are robbed of wages and they are not provided with a decent living. They are limited to bargaining power by the fact they are in the subordinate class, and thus, fighting back against exploitation is very hard. Poverty also enhances reliance of women on the contractors, middlemen and employers, in which women are bound in traps of debts and victimhood. Migrant women can hardly obtain welfare and legal redress due to their migration status. The migrant women workers do not have local identity, ration cards, or registration with labor welfare boards, which means that they are not covered by any of the public distribution, health, and social security programs. The language barrier, ignorance, and fear of victimization prevent reporting reported abuse or wage violation even further. Women as migrants are not visible in society or politically marginal and they are out of their home countries as well as their new homelands. This liminality makes them particularly susceptible to trafficking, sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. Lastly, informality institutionalizes precarity by accepting the unstable and unregulated labor conditions. Most migrant women workers are overwhelmingly in the informal sector where work is informal, illegal and beyond the scope of labor laws in Odisha. The lack of written contracts, minimum wages, maternity leave, and social security make sure that exploitation is not an isolated and unique case. Informality also removes accountability and employers and contractors can get away with legal liability and completely pass the risk to workers. Altogether, gender, caste, class, migration status, and informality intersect to form an intricate chain of vulnerability of migrant women workers in Odisha. This is to be tackled by the application of an intersectional policy framework that acknowledges such overlapping inequalities and outgrows disjointed or gender-neutral interventions.

6. Feminist Political Economy and Informal Labor

Feminist political economy criticizes mainstream economics systems on the basis of not recognizing any work which remains unpaid and informal, with a significant portion of that work being done by women. The work of migrant women is in a paradoxical state, it is necessary economically, but invisible socially. This essay places the work of migrant women in this wider feminist discourse, which posits that informal labor markets do not exist in the unregulated void, but rather as systems of exploiting women, which are supported by state negligence and gender practices.



7. Informal Labor and Migration in Odisha

7.1. Organization of Informal Labor Market in Odisha

The economy of Odisha is largely agricultural, with mining and low-end service sectors, all of which have to be based on informal work. National labor surveys claim that most of the employment in Odisha is informal, and women take up a large proportion of this labor. In Odisha informal employment includes, Agricultural labor, Brick kilns, construction and Domestic work, Street trading and petty trade, Home-based manufacturing (beedi rolling, handicrafts)

7.2. Female Migration Trends

There is an independent migration and family migration of women in Odisha to work. Migration is often includes,

- Seasonal, associated with farm cycles
- Distress-based, drought, debt and unemployment-based.
- Circular, where people went to the countryside and came back to the cities.

Female migration has been an individual and family phenomenon in Odisha as women go to work to support their families and maintain their livelihoods in situations of economic insecurity. Their migration is not a matter of choice so much as structural limitation and mainly seasonal, distress induced and circular. A big percentage of female migration is seasonal and it is directly associated with agricultural season. Because agriculture is mostly rain fed and offers only jobs at specific times, women move to the lean seasons to work in construction and brick kilns, household jobs and other unskilled work. Such seasonal movement provides a short-term income but does not support economic stability. Migration of women is also distress-related as they are mostly induced by constant droughts, agrarian distresses, debts and low employment prospects locally. This is because poverty and landlessness force women to move out of their countries as a survival mechanism, which is likely to force them into low paying and insecure jobs. These migrations subject women to exploitative labor, wage disparities as well as hazardous living conditions. Lastly, migration by women in Odisha is mostly circular where women move back and forth between rural areas of origin and in urban or semi-urban areas. Circular migration gives households an opportunity to maintain links with the rural life, but it denies women an opportunity to access stable jobs and schemes based on residence. This precarious and cyclical mobility supports the concentration of women in the informal sector and continues to keep them in the state of long term vulnerability instead of empowering them economically. The migration of females is often



underestimated because they are referred to as dependents yet they engage in income generating ventures. This invisibility of statistics leads to policy negligence.

8. Gender Relations of Vulnerability

8.1. Pay Inequality and Financial Uncertainty

Wage inequality is one of the most apparent types of gendered vulnerability. Informal migrant women always earn low wages in comparison to those of men doing similar tasks. There is the gendered understanding of skill coupled with the poor bargaining power of women that support low wages. Other factors that contribute to economic insecurity are- Irregular employment, Lack of savings, Reliance on the labor contractors and Lack of financial inclusion.

8.2. Occupational Segregation

Migrant women have been concentrated in jobs considered unskilled or feminine including domestic duties, caring, and cottage industry. These roles are basically Poorly paid, Socially undervalued, not included in labor legislation. Therefore occupational segregation inhibits vertical movements and gender inequalities in the workforce.

8.3. The Double Burden of Work

The burden of paid work and unpaid care work of migrant women is twofold. Women continue to have the duties of cooking, childcare and cleaning the house even after working long hours. This free work is not seen but it is vital and restricts the ability of women to find superior jobs or training in skills.

9. Intersectional Factors Intensifying Vulnerability

9.1. Caste, Tribe, and Social Exclusion

The migrant women workers in Odisha consist of 92% and a significant percentage come from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These communities are historically disadvantaged, landless and have restricted access to education, which increases labor market disadvantages. The Impact of caste and tribe identity resulted in following points.

- **Job allocation-** Caste and tribal identity have a strong impact on job allocation whereby, SC and ST women are limited to the least secure, low status and dangerous types of work. They are over-represented in the construction industry, brick kilns, agricultural labor, domestic labor, and other manual and casual



labor industries. Caste-based occupational segregation limits access to skilled or more remunerated jobs, perpetuating poverty within generations.

- **Wage levels-** Wages levels also get seriously influenced by caste and tribal status. Women of the SC and ST are usually underpaid as compared to men, and even to those of other dominant caste groups doing the same duties. The lack of bargaining power and fear of losing their jobs due to social stigma puts them at a disadvantage in the negotiation of wages or even demanding the legal minimum pay, which leads to continuous exploitation of wages.
- **Abuse and exploitation-** Extremely, abuse and exploitation are increased to SC and ST migrant women because of the interaction of gender relations with caste. Employers, contractors and supervisors are more likely to abuse them verbally, physically, sexually harass them and coerce them. Such abuse is usually normalized by their poor social status and prevents reporting.
- **Grievance redressal access** - Lastly, there is extremely limited access to grievance redressal mechanisms. Many SC and ST women do not seek justice due to a lack of knowledge on the legal rights, illiteracy, language barriers and fear of retaliation. Accountability is further undermined by institutional laxity, and caste discrimination in the enforcement agencies. Consequently, caste and tribal identity do not only define the results of the labor market, but also replicate systemic invisibility and exclusion among migrant women workers in Odisha.

9.2. The fact of migration and invisibility to the law

Migrant women tend to be deprived of local identity papers, residence documents, or ration cards making them ineligible to welfare programs. This is due to the fact that their non-permanent and mobile status legally makes them invisible, thus they cannot access healthcare, housing or legal protection.

9.3. Experience of Exploitation and Violence

The informal workplaces are the main areas of employment of migrant women workers and subjects them to diverse and compound expulsions. This is due to the lack of formal contracts, regulatory controls, and proper mechanisms of enforcement that result in the abuse being treated as a norm and not an exception. **Sexual harassment** is a common danger in the informal sector of work including construction sites, brick kiln, household work and farm labor. Migrant women are usually employed by male supervisors or contractors who are in full control and women are prone to uninvited advances, manipulation, and the threat of being fired. The **fear of retaliation**, stigma and institutional support deter



reporting. Informal workplaces are also characterized by verbal and physical abuse. Women are often called caste based slurs, humiliated, intimidated and, of course, violence is a physical way of labor control. The economic reliance and migrant status do not allow them to oppose or leave abusive settings. Another type of exploitation is **wage theft**, employers regularly fail to pay on time, they underpay women or even refuse to pay them, they exploit the fact that there is no written contract and that women have little access to legal procedures. This problem is exacerbated by gender and caste pay discrimination. Lastly, the **health risks and occupational hazards** are integrated with which migrant women are exposed to unsafe working conditions. Extended work hours, insecurity equipment, insufficient cleanliness, and maternity measures devastate the well-being of the physical and the reproductive health. The combination of these factors makes precarity institutionalized and support the structural vulnerability of migrant women in informal labour market. Silence and victimization are cycled by fear of losing a job, social stigmatization, and legal illiteracy.

10. Institutional Gaps and State Policies

Existing Legal Frameworks

India has a number of labour laws which protect the unorganised workers such as:

- Unorganized Workers Social Security Act.
- Minimum Wages Act Acts of sexual harassment against women in the workplace have been defined by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act. Nonetheless, there is still a laxity in enforcement especially among migrant women working in the informal sector.

11. Odisha-Based Initiatives

Welfare measures that Odisha has brought are:

- **Mission Shakti**, which advocates women self-help groups. Mission Shakti is one of the flagship programmes of Odisha, which aims at empowering women by establishing self-help groups (SHGs). Mission Shakti has empowered the women economically by granting them access to microcredit, livelihood training, and collective entrepreneurship to become stronger economically at the grassroots level. Among rural women, both of the SC and ST women, SHGs have increased their financial inclusion and social solidarity. Nevertheless, migrant women have challenges maintaining SHG because of seasonal and circular migration, which does not expand the reach of the programme among highly mobile personnel.



- Creation of employment under **MGNREGS**, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been a very significant tool in creation of employment in rural Odisha. The scheme is increasing livelihood security by offering up to 100 days of wage employment to help reduce distress migration and boost livelihood security. In the case of women, MGNREGS provides a relatively safer working environment and equal wages. However, wage arrears, lack of employment, and poor application in drought prone areas tend to be insufficient in curbing pressures of migration.
- **Migrant worker support programs**, Somewhat, migrant worker support programmes, such as registration programs, labour helplines, and inter-state cooperation systems also aim at providing migrant workers with welfare benefits. Although these steps are a positive indication of progress in the policy, the lack of awareness, portability of entitlements, and gender sensitiveness in implementing these policies still leaves many migrant women out. On the whole, even with a progressive agenda, welfare policies need more intersectional and migrant-responsive mechanisms to make them sensitive to the lived experiences of women. Although such efforts have eased access to credit and jobs, they usually do not focus on intersectional risk, i.e. on the basis of caste, migration, and informality.

12. Agency, Resistance, and Coping Strategies

Regardless of the systemic constraints, migrant women are resilient and agentic as evidenced by:

- Self-help group involvement.
- Childcare and housing informal networks.
- Joint bargaining in certain industries.
- The involvement with civil society organizations.

Although the sources of such strategies are scarce, they disrupt the migrant women who are only victims depicted by narratives.

13. Odisha-Specific Case Studies

13.1. Migrant Women in Brick Kilns

In western and southern Odisha, brick kilns use great quantities of seasonal migrant families. Women do physically challenging jobs like molding bricks and carrying them, usually on piece-rate work that is paid to males headed homesteads. The brick kilns in western and southern Odisha are one of the most exploitative places of seasonal migrant labor where great numbers of migrant families are deployed in the non-agriculture season. Kiln labor is central to the labor of women, but this is consistently undervalued



and made invisible. Women traditionally carry out labor physically demanding jobs including brick moulding, loading, and transporting raw and baked bricks usually during unpleasant climatic conditions. Also, even though their wage worth is high, it is usually paid on a piece-rate and given to a male head of a household, which continues to keep women economically dependent and conceals wage exploitation based on gender.

13.2. The main weaknesses

- Lack of wage transparency- Lack of wage transparency is one of the major weaknesses that female employees have to grapple with. Absence of written contracts, ambiguous calculations of pieces-rate and receiving money via intermediaries deprives women of information of knowing the amount they are earning and whether they are earning reasonably or not. This obscurity allows underpayment and wage control by contractors and kiln owners in a systematic manner.
- Child labor and education- Child labor and education are rampant in the brick kiln sites. Migrant families bring children along, and they help in the moulding of bricks or their transportation to work harder in the household. A shortage of schools around them, language differences, and hostels not available seasonally disrupt the education of children, and this cycle of poverty and labor exploitation continues between generations.
- No maternity or health benefits- Women workers are also fully excluded of the maternity and health benefits. Working in long shifts, dealing with dust, heat, and heavy loads are hazardous health wise especially to pregnant and lactating women. Lack of crches, medical centers or even paid maternity leaves also worsens the vulnerability in reproductive health.
- Debt bondage by means of labor contractors- Lastly, debt bondage by means of labor contractors is also a characteristic of kiln employments. Emergency payments made in times of distress tie families to contractors limiting the freedom of movement and power of negotiation. In the case of women this system increases the exploitation with neither productive nor reproductive labour being extracted nor being taken care of.

13.3. Women Migrants in Construction Work

As per the study, women migrants are observed to work in construction sector at a rate of Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and Rourkela are some of the urban centers that attract women migrants to construction work. The women are normally hired to work as assistant as opposed to being skilled workers, and this interacts to increase wage disparities.



13.4. SHGs and mission Shakti role

The Mission Shakti program by Odisha has empowered migrant and rural women to join self-help groups (SHGs). The groups Create access to microcredit, Improve collective bargaining, Have an independent economy. Nonetheless, SHGs cannot counter structural labor market inequalities only.

14. Policy Implications

1. Informal Workers Universal Social Security. Implement mobile benefits welfare regardless of place or employer.
2. Gender Sensitive Immigration Policies. Understand that women are not dependent migrants.
3. Domestic and Care Work Legal Recognition. Make domestic workers a subject to labor laws that have enforceable rights.
4. Empowering enforcement machineries. The sphere of inspections of labor inspection should be taken to informal and even private sites.
5. Improved Data Collection Disaggregated labor statistics of gender, caste, and migration.

15. Policy Recommendations

Intersectional vulnerability can be dealt with by proposing the paper recommends:

1. Intersectionally Informed Labor Policies. It should be noted that gender intersections with caste and migratory status and should be taken into account in policies.
2. Social Security Extension. Free healthcare, maternity leave, and pensions to non-formal employees.
3. Law Consciousness and Compliance. Enhancing the enforcement of labor laws and grievance systems.
4. Informal Work Recognition. The informal labor to be formally declared as productive and necessary.

16. Conclusion

Migrant women workers in the Odisha informal labor market do not feel vulnerable because it is not a monolithic, isolated situation but rather as an intersectional fact. Their work supports family and urban economies, but is not appreciated or guarded. The solution to the marginalization of them is a radical



reconsideration of labor policies which is based on feminist and intersectional views. Dignity and security of migrant women workers can only be guaranteed through inclusive rights-based approaches.

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