

GENDER INCLUSIVE URBAN SPACES: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Lecture04

Module 2.2 - Migrant Women Workers in Urban Centres

The subject of migration in contemporary times has been intertwined with the the subject of gender. One of the very important aspects in sociology about migration is mobility. And here we are talking about people moving for the sake of survival. What kind of survival are we talking about?

It is an economic necessity. So, the relationship between migration is very much intertwined with work. Who is the migrant worker? Patriarchy and androcentric social science have mostly depicted the migrant as a a male worker.

There is generally an invisibility of women as workers. What do we mean by invisibility? The kind of work that women do is sidelined and not recognized. That is one thing. But it is not seen and it is underreported because of the idea of gender inequality.

So, some of the issues that I am going to discuss in the lecture today are the relationship between migration, economic institutions, and gender inequality. So, we are going to touch on issues such as pay inequity, wage discrimination, as well as language barriers, which sometimes serve as problematic entities in the economic institution. Why is language an economic issue? 'You do not speak the language, so I pay you less',

is the way that people tell. The vulnerability of the migrant worker - 'you are an outsider, and that is why we are trying to do this'. So, why do people actually move? They move for work because, in the old sociological context, we see what is a push factor - usually poverty, deprivation, destitution, and other kinds of vulnerabilities. The pull factor, on the other hand, is opportunity.

And when there are opportunities, there are people who go in a particular direction. Why are women invisible? The woman worker is invisible primarily because she is seen as a dependent, dependent in terms of marriage migration. While the focus for today is rural to urban migration, where people usually marry within their, you know, village and move away from there.

So, if they move away from there, it is considered marriage migration, and we have to understand that for marriage migration. It is often called dependent on the male migrant. But that is not true because there are many, many women who also move. Why do we essentialize work as gendered? There is a very, very interesting and enormous compatibility between the idea of work and the way that work is given a gendered label. So, we are actually looking at a very interesting kind of labor.

Let us take, for example, work such as care work. It is based on the concept in sociology that Arlie Hochschild termed emotional labor. You smile with a job. It is not normal to, you know, just be angry.

But you need to smile. When do you smile? You smile when you are trying to welcome someone. You smile when you try to make people happy. You are also expected to make people happy.

And that is emotional labor. The example, that was given is of flight attendants on airplanes, which the sexist term for it, of course, was the 'air hostess'. But, every kind of care that the 'air hostess' or the flight attendant takes is something that was considered giving pleasure, giving peace, and making someone comfortable.

So, making someone comfortable is care, nursing, child care, elder care, is all work that people do and people expect women to do a lot of this work because there is a stereotyping that women make the best care workers. So, if you want domestic workers or domestic maids, then you say it is women who are doing it. If men do the care work due to the concept of feminization of labor, even though they have migrated and they are prepared to take work as nurses, people pay them less,

institutions pay them less because you say that it is, you know, women who are doing this job. There are several kinds of roles of the migrant worker. And we need to understand that these roles are spanning across the different social institutions. Family, for instance.

The workplace. The workplace may be a construction site. It may be the household of another person if the migrant worker has gone as a domestic servant. So, what is your household becomes a workplace for your domestic service. So, the place also undergoes change.

But, what is interesting is when a woman comes as a new bride into the marriage and then the migrant worker, the male worker, moves to a construction site, she begins to also work with him as a construction laborer. But, slowly with time and the birth of children,

the education of children becomes a priority for the migrant worker. When that becomes a priority for the migrant worker, she decides to improve her skills and move to domestic work.

Most often, the domestic scenario is supposed to be something which is far more comfortable than the construction site. It is what people think, whether it actually happens or not is another situation. So, there is also the discrimination of the girl child. There is the temptation of actually putting the girl children also to work in the construction site. That is why the women are more protective of their children and want to send them off to school.

If there is a school that is attached to the construction site, then very often women feel comfortable letting their children stay there because if they need to suddenly go and check on them to make sure they are okay. But one of the primary motivating factors for migrant workers, both as families and as women, is what we call aspirational mobility, meaning they aspire to be better than the previous generation. They do not want their own lives to be drudgery, nor their children's lives to be a form of drudgery.

And so they expect this change to happen. I want to go back and ask why there is gender inequality and why there was wage discrimination in the workplace in this scenario. As I said, this wage discrimination happens because it is not equal pay for equal work. The slogan of the second wave of the feminist movement was a reality on construction sites where men were paid more than women. And this created gender inequality in the workplace, not only in ideology but also in practice and wage discrimination.

But the reality was, and is, and several studies in gender and development have shown that very often the discrimination is based on the perceived physical inequality of men and women, and that men can carry many more bricks than women. Having said that, the reality, however, is something quite different. And what is that different reality? It is that the role of a migrant worker as a woman is supposed to be a secondary role.

But it becomes a primary role when the husband is lying somewhere under the tree, drunk and inept. At the end of the day, while she needs his 100 rupees apart from her 70 rupees as wages to put food on the table for herself, her husband, his parents, their three children, and some visiting family members. So, a total of eight or nine members. How does she feed them with her 70 rupees or whatever?

So, she needs his money as well. So, at four o'clock when she goes to the worker for her wages, he says, 'Where is your husband?' She realizes he has not done that work. So, she goes back, and when she goes back, she actually does his work. So, what kind of equality is this?

Now, intellectually, I want to ask this question. Why have women been left out of any discourse, and particularly from the discourse of migration? So, what are we actually talking about over here? We are talking about the reason that women have been left out because of androcentrism and patriarchy. Ideologically,

How have they left them out? You do not collect data about women's work. Simple as that. They are invisible because we are not collecting enough data about their work. We do not even recognize the work that they do as work because we think that the work is an extension of housework and childcare.

Who benefits from leaving women out? Clearly, the people who benefit from leaving women out are the dominant ideological force that believes that men are better than women, who want work done by women but refuse to give them credit. And how do we change this eclipsing, and how has it been achieved? These are the questions that we need to ask.

How has this been achieved is a very interesting thing. The change in the eclipsing begins when you start. And now, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, finally, after about eight decades of a successful women's movement, we see that you cannot be gender-blind. You need to have your eyes open to the kind of reality. So, we need to understand that the concept of the migrant woman as a dependent and not a primary wage earner is a myth.

It is not a reality. So, she is not a dependent, but she is a worker in her own right. She is a primary wage earner. A study done among, you know, street vendors in Nagaland, in Dimapur, Nagaland, by one of my students, said that the women are not recognizing that they are the primary earners themselves.

Why does that happen? For two reasons. Because the women have been conditioned to believe that the husbands are the primary earners, even though they are drugged or drunk and lying under a tree. And when the women were asked, do you have a bank account? She says, no, no, I give all my wages to my husband.

So, the control is still in the hands of the male. So, that is one of the reasons for the invisibility. The other thing is that you are defining work by gender, like care work. I have already said that when a man does care work, he does not get enough credit. He also gets paid less because it is, after all, something that women do.

Migrant women very rarely have maternal benefits, and, of course, the men have rare benefits. In countries like Sweden, we have them, but in the Indian context, how many men are really getting paternal leave? But even for women, the low-wage earner—the migrant earner—is someone who cannot get her due, who cannot get her leave because—I mean, paid leave—they would just say, 'Okay, you go and come back to work whenever.' And if there are problems after the pregnancy, if there are problems after the pregnancy, they cannot work while they are pregnant.

If it is physical labor that they cannot do, they cannot do it. If it is domestic work, they can continue until the end. But if they slow down, the employers may not want them. So, everything goes against them. That is what I am trying to say.

And there are no benefits. There are no health benefits. So, if you are going to a government hospital, you do not know how good the government hospital is and what your chances are, and your baby's chances are, for a healthy delivery. That is another big thing. So, the health benefits are missing—completely missing—for informal labor and migrant workers.

This is because of the hidden kind of gender biases that exist. Oh, when we hire women, they are going to get pregnant anyway. You know, what is that kind of thing? You know, the fact that there is a biological partner or the husband who is involved is not there. He is just expected not to be involved in this.

And when the women are working, we are kind of looking at the invisibility in the workplace. In a sense that when women do the work, sometimes the men take credit for it. At the end of the day, the husband might come and say, I have done it. I have done it. How do we actually subscribe to that kind of situation?

I think it is very, very important for migrant workers, especially when they come to a new place, to learn new things. One of the absolutely important aspects for a migrant worker to learn is to look at gender equality at home. When you are raising boys right, and encourage gender boundaries, you know, the girls are expected to study, they are

expected to work, they are expected to do everything. But, what are we doing with our boys is the question.

Let the boy understand and respect the work that is considered domestic labor, especially when he comes to a new place. The good thing he can learn is that both boys and girls go to school and are treated individually as entities of their own. There should also be a kind of reality that allows boys to look at gender as a natural process, as a continuum, as we say, not as boys at one end of the spectrum and girls at the other end of the spectrum. We do not want that to happen at all.

We want boys to look at work and labor with equal respect. And the workplace environment also has to be friendly. You cannot have a place where women are feeling sexually vulnerable. If they are getting assaulted by their co-workers, by the bosses, if they are getting assaulted, harassed,

if there are sexist remarks being made, there should be an atmosphere to complain about it. If they were used to that back home, they should not carry those gender stereotypes over here. But, in the new place, I think it is very, very important to actually not dispense with, you know, to actually dispense with the old kind of stereotypes and to bring in new and interesting ones.

I think one of the very, very important aspects of migration and the economy is, you know, the COVID crisis that we have had. And, you know, with the COVID crisis everywhere in the world, but particularly in India, you realize that the cities are absolutely dependent on migrant workers. There is the concept of othering—what do you mean by other? Where have they come from? Where have we come from? The 'we' and the 'they' is something that we are absolutely trying to what should I say, look upon in a very, very interesting and difficult fashion.

I want to say two or three things in this context. What all are migrant workers doing? I have mentioned domestic work. I have mentioned construction work. But, what work are they not doing?

Now, if you come into my institution, which is a university or an IIT or something, how many workers in our, you know, non-permanent workers are 'migrant workers'? And what is migration really? If it is Hyderabad or Chennai that I am talking about, even if it is the surrounding villages, it is migration. But, when we are talking about the urban

crisis and the construction workers, you are talking about people coming from Bihar to go as far as Kerala. There is the othering of the worker.

And, you know, there is also the whole idea of homelessness. With the COVID crisis, suddenly we started closing our doors. The domestic work, and the domestic worker became a dispensable option. How do we talk about this and why do we talk about this?

Many women who are domestic workers were asked not to come to work during the Corona crisis. The class divide became very severe. Let me take the IT workers, for instance, who were working from home. WFH, the acronym for working from home, became very interesting. But, for the domestic worker, the home that they left to work in the home of the other became a place where they could not go anymore. The class divide forced the employer to do their own domestic chores because the entire family was there.

The middle class went through a gender revolution. And the migrant worker created that gender revolution because she was no longer available to that middle-class household. The class divide between the worker and the employer began to become wider and wider. Studies have shown us that the domestic worker is somebody who likes to go out because she learns many things from the urban household. Many of the urban employers have themselves migrated back-

This is what I have done in my study: return migration from the United States and other places. They eat international food, and this poor domestic migrant worker has been taught how to boil pasta, grate cheese, make international food, and do a whole lot of things, but she becomes indispensable because in the morning, while going to work, her employer tells her to boil pasta and keep it ready with all the vegetables. All I have to do is come back and do it.

Now, the employer herself is working from home, and she is also depending on the older generation, if they are there in the family, and her own spouse to help out. Men began to pitch in. So, are we saying that there was more gender equality in the urban household due to the COVID crisis? Partly. But, for the migrant worker,

not being able to go to work, whether she was working in a home as a domestic worker, whether she was working in a factory, whether she was working in an IT company as a cleaner, as a sanitation worker, she needed to go home. And there were no trains. People did not go. So, you know, you saw hordes of migrants, women carrying their children on their shoulders and in their arms, walking away in a way that was never done before.

It was an unprecedented search for home. 'If I am going to die, I would rather die in my own place.' So, the othering became a reality. The other aspect that we need to understand is that these people began to be worried. If they are in the cities because they were doing well, they were going to get education for their children.

But, if the schools are closed and they have to be at home and the kind of schools that their children are going to, because all these workers are poor, many of them are Dalit, many of them are Muslim, many of them are marginalized in every definition of the term. So, the intersections of deprivation, the intersections of marginality are extremely interesting for, you know, the whole idea of, you know, the migrant women. The gendered realities of migration are that if you are poor and Dalit, and you do not have an alternative employment,

why are you here in this city, in this alien city, which has very little respect for you? The city feels the indispensability of the migrant women. Especially the households where they missed them so much. The city definitely looks at this kind of indispensability. But, I am trying to focus on one very, very interesting aspect of migration and that is

There is a critical contributor to an economy. Of course, in India, the remittances are not so high. But, in a country like the Philippines, it is the nannies, the maids, and even the sex workers who are migrating, who are remitting large amounts of money that actually make very, very interesting kinds of changes for us. I think there are

very interesting aspects of migration, and policy tells us that we need to change many, many things. Now, one of the aspects of migration that we need to understand is the problems of the migrant worker. What can be done? Because how many states in India really have, you know, recommendations? One is language training. That is something, you know, when a migrant worker comes, I think it is only fair, what used to be called in the 1970s and 80s as adult education.

It is not just about being literate, but also learning the social and cultural skills. You know, knowing how to operate an ATM, because when the migrant worker, particularly the woman, has to send money home, you know, people actually are charging them something to just do a bank transfer. You know, it does not cost you and me anything to do a small bank transfer of 5000 rupees or something like that or even less. But when they have to do it, somebody is taking a commission from them of a couple of hundred rupees to do that just simply transfer that money.

Somebody is taking money from them to put money into their own SIM on the mobile phone. So, the mobile phone, which becomes—you know, the children of migrants are first-generation smartphone users. And very often, the gap between the parents and the children, particularly the mothers and the children, becomes very, very wide. And this is the kind of thing that we need to, you know, guard against. So, language training, cultural, and social skills when migrants come.

If the men abandon them, there should be legal counseling. You know, in many places, what happens is legal counseling is done so that they know their rights. You cannot always be called an outsider. When there is domestic violence and you have been married for 20 years, there is as much right over the matrimonial home as there is to the natal. There is very little right for the poor.

So, the man is expected to provide for the children. And when he runs away—see, in India, you say there is not much divorce, but there is a lot of abandonment of the woman and children by the migrant worker. Sometimes, he just does not want to take care of them, and he abandons them. And then the woman is left alone to fend for her family. So, what does she do?

What does the state do to support such things? So, I think many of these recommendations have to be taken very seriously for, you know, migrant workers. And we need to see how the state can help them. So, in housing—when we saw the COVID crisis—I still have not brought up the most important crisis of health care. We have all forgotten now what happened in 2020.

But, I think many people who were hospitalized were middle class, upper middle class, and rich. Many of the poor could not afford hospitals. Many people just died. What kind of health care do we have? How do we need—you know, when people started giving the vaccinations, were migrant workers a priority or not?

Who takes care of them? Do you think of them as the other? When we decide that we are actually beginning to look at the migrant worker as a contributor and an inevitable contributor to the economy, whether she has come through marriage or whether she has been contracted directly by the workers, it is something that is very, very important.

Before I sign off, I want to also move to the middle class and upper class migration. As people have education- Education is the biggest challenge in the villages and the biggest

attraction for migrant workers to come. Once people get educated, their opportunities also increase tremendously. Therefore, there are no boundaries. There are no state barriers.

At least within India, we do not need visas to migrate. Migration is a process where there should be better dreams. And I think we need to understand when we are planning for the next decade that we need to take into consideration what some people like to call guest workers, what some people like to call sojourners, who become settlers.

So, from temporary migrants to permanent settlers, permanent settlers when they begin to, you know, buy property. And yes, women also will become and already have become in many places, not only major contributors to the economy, but the consumers of what the urban areas really want to give us—meaning homeowners, vehicle owners, and people who are going to be investing in the idea of the future. Thank you.

(Video Story)