

AGRICULTURAL MIGRATION: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES OF MIGRATED WOMEN SUGARCANE WORKERS
Nireekshan Singh Gowgi S.K.

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Government First Grade College, Bettampady, Puttur, Dakshina Kannada.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18848279>

ABSTRACT:

The agriculture sector in India provides employment opportunities to approximately 52% of the population, making it the largest employment generator in the country. In the second quarter of 2024, agriculture contributed ₹5,320.92 billion to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Additionally, the sector accounted for about USD 48.9 billion in exports by 2024, reflecting an 8% decline compared to 2023.

Often referred to as the backbone of India, agriculture plays a vital role in the nation's economic development. However, the sector faces numerous challenges, including environmental uncertainties, loss of arable land, insufficient irrigation and storage facilities, inadequate minimum support prices for crops, and slow adoption of advanced technologies. Despite various government initiatives and programs aimed at revitalizing agriculture, the desired level of growth remains elusive.

These challenges often lead to migration within the agricultural workforce. This study focuses on the issues faced by women who migrated from Tamil Nadu and parts of Bellary in Karnataka to Ganadalu village in Mandya district for employment in sugarcane cultivation. The research findings are presented in detailed tables to provide insights into their experiences and challenges.

KEYWORDS:

India's Agricultural Sector, Agricultural Migration, Women, Issues.

.....

Introduction

Despite being an agrarian nation, India's agriculture sector is entangled in a vicious cycle of persistent issues, including untimely rainfall, lack of minimum support prices, the influence of intermediaries, inadequate markets, and insufficient agricultural storage facilities. These challenges compel agricultural workers to migrate from their native places to distant regions in search of better livelihoods. Since a significant portion of agricultural activities depends on rainfall, farmers often find themselves caught between extreme weather events such as heavy rains and droughts, making their lives increasingly difficult. In such circumstances, the lack of consistent livelihood opportunities forces agricultural laborers to seek employment elsewhere, making migration a natural outcome.

Although the Central and State Governments have implemented various schemes, programs, and policies to revive the agriculture sector, the insufficient execution of irrigation projects and agricultural programs has failed to curb this migration trend.

Agricultural Migration in India

Agricultural migration in India is a notable socio-economic phenomenon shaped by labor demands, economic disparities, and environmental challenges. Migration, in this context, generally involves the movement of laborers from rural areas to other rural or urban regions. In some cases, temporary migration occurs to participate in agriculture-related tasks such as sowing, harvesting, and processing.

Key factors driving migration include limited employment opportunities, small landholdings, and low agricultural wages in rural areas. Workers are often drawn to urban centers or agriculturally prosperous regions offering better wages and employment opportunities.

Other contributing factors include:

- **Seasonality:** Agricultural work is highly seasonal, with labor migration peaking during critical periods such as harvesting.
- **Environmental Challenges:** Unpredictable weather conditions, including unseasonal rains, droughts, floods, and declining soil fertility, force farmers and laborers to seek alternative livelihoods.
- **Social Inequalities:** Marginalized groups, such as women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, are particularly vulnerable to migration due to systemic social and economic exclusion.

Women's Role in Agricultural Migration

Women account for approximately 33% of the agricultural workforce. Agricultural migration has reshaped gender roles in society, influenced by economic pressures, social norms, and labor demands. Traditionally male-dominated, the sector now sees increasing participation from women due to changing socio-economic dynamics.

Female agricultural migrants often engage in specific roles such as planting, harvesting, and processing, which are traditionally associated with women's labor. However, they frequently work in informal, low-paying jobs with limited rights and protections, facing issues such as gender-based discrimination and unsafe working conditions. The lack of childcare facilities further limits their ability to secure stable employment.

The gendered dimension of migration also affects decision-making processes. Men typically migrate first, leaving women to manage households and agricultural responsibilities. However, independent migration by women is becoming more common as societal norms evolve.

Review of Literature

Kendre (2011): Studied the socio-economic challenges of migrant sugarcane workers, particularly among Scheduled Castes, nomadic tribes, and other backward communities. The study highlighted the vulnerable economic backgrounds of these groups, focusing on sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, especially in Kolhapur district.

Gaikwad and Jadhav (2017): Emphasized the critical role of women in sugarcane farming, describing them as "hidden farmers" with limited access to essential resources like land, technology, finance, and education. The study called for strategies to enhance women's skills and capacities in sugarcane farming, recognizing their significant contribution to employment and production.

Patil (2014): Highlighted the essential role of migrant laborers in sugar production, noting their dire living conditions despite decades of independence.

Biswas et al. (2016): Examined the hazardous working conditions faced by rural laborers in the sugarcane industry, identifying numerous occupational health risks.

Nagesha and Bhat (2019): Discussed migration as a vital strategy for agricultural laborers seeking better opportunities in urban areas. Factors

such as unemployment, low wages, poverty, agricultural failures, large family sizes, underemployment, and natural disasters were identified as key drivers of migration.

Research Methodology

This research focuses on examining the challenges faced by women from 120 families who migrated from Bellary district, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu to Ganadalu village in Mandya taluk, Mandya district, for employment in sugarcane cultivation.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the social issues encountered by women engaged in sugarcane cultivation.
- To analyze the health-related challenges faced by these migrant women.

The study employed a Descriptive Research Design, and data were collected using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. A two-part interview schedule was utilized to gather information:

- The first part captured general details about the participants, such as name, age, education level, and place of origin.
- The second part consisted of ten questions/statements focused on social and health-related aspects.

Data were gathered by visiting the workplaces of migrant women and conducting interviews, each lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the data collection process. Participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, and their voluntary consent was obtained. No coercion or undue influence was exerted on the participants. The confidentiality of the collected information was strictly maintained, ensuring that it was used solely for educational and research purposes. The rights and dignity of the participants were respected at all times, and no human rights violations occurred during the research.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research, this study has certain limitations. The sample

size was restricted to 120 women, and many potential participants were excluded due to the use of convenience sampling. Consequently, the findings may not be fully representative of the broader population.

Results and Discussion

Among the 120 women surveyed, 17 respondents (14.17%) were aged 10–20 years; 43 respondents (35.83%) were aged 20–30 years; 37 respondents (30.84%) were aged 30–40 years; 13 respondents (10.83%) were aged 40–50 years; 5 respondents (4.16%) were aged 50–60 years; 4 respondents (3.3%) were aged 60–70 years; and one respondent (0.84%) was aged 70 years or older.

In terms of education, 78 respondents (65%) had not attended school. Forty respondents (33.33%) had completed schooling up to classes 1–9, while the remaining 2 respondents (1.67%) had completed SSLC or PUC.

Regarding marital status, 97 respondents (80.83%) were married, and 23 respondents (19.17%) were unmarried.

On family involvement in sugarcane labor, 96 respondents (80%) reported having 1–5 family members working as sugarcane laborers, 23 respondents (19.17%) stated that 6–10 family members were involved, and one respondent indicated that more than 10 members of her family were engaged in sugarcane farm labor.

As for the duration of their employment, 70 women (58.33%) had started working as sugarcane farm laborers within the past one month, 16 women (13.33%) began working in the last two months, 29 women (24.17%) started in the last three months, and 5 women (4.17%) had been working for the past six months.

Table 01: Are you suffering from any health-related problems?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Interviewees (N: 120)
1	Yes	80 (66.67%)
2	No	40 (33.33%)

Table 01 (a): If yes, what are the health-related problems?

Sl. No.	Response	Number of Respondents (N: 80)
1	Back pain	51 (63.75%)

2	Hypertension (BP)	09 (11.25%)
3	Diabetes	08 (10%)
4	Other	12(15%)

Table 02: Do you have any difficulties communicating with local people?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	Yes	85 (70.83%)
2	No	35 (29.16%)

Table 03: Do you think migration affected your children's education?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	Yes	83 (69.16%)
2	No	37 (30.83%)

Table 04: Do you have any addiction/habit?

Sl. No.	Response	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	Yes	65 (54.16%)
2	No	55 (45.83%)

Table 04 (a): If yes, what kind of addiction/habit?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents (N: 65)
1	Tobacco only	55 (84.61%)
2	Alcohol only	57 (87.69%)
3	Tobacco and alcohol	59 (90.76%)
4	Other	06 (9.23%)

Table 05: Do you get paid directly by the mason for your work?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	Yes	06 (5%)
2	No	114 (95%)

Table 05 (a): If not, to whom does the mason pay the wages?

Sl. No.	Person who collects the wage	Number of Respondents (N: 114)
---------	------------------------------	--------------------------------

1	The husband	80 (70.17%)
2	Father	13 (11.40%)
3	Mother-in-law	11 (9.64%)
4	Father-in-law	08 (7.01%)
5	The son	02 (1.75%)

Table 06: Have you been discriminated against by local people?

Sl. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	Yes	52 (43.33%)
2	No	68 (56.66%)

Table 07: Are you facing any kind of problem related to location due to migration?

Order no	Responses	Number of Interviewees (N: 120)
1	Yes	56 (46.66%)
2	No	64 (53.33%)

Table 08: Are you eating nutritious food?

Order no	Response	Number of Interviewees (N: 120)
1	No	120 (100%)

Table 09: Have proper basic facilities like toilet/bathroom/shelter been provided?

Sl. No.	Response	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	No	120 (100%)

Table 10: Has proper drinking water been provided?

Sl. No.	Response	Number of Respondents (N: 120)
1	No	120 (100%)

Migration for Employment and Agricultural Activities

While individuals and families often migrate from rural to urban areas for employment and economic opportunities, unskilled agricultural workers tend to migrate to other rural areas with greater agricultural activity. This phenomenon is termed rural-to-rural migration. In Mandya

district, sugarcane cultivation, which spans 12 months from sowing to harvesting, drives this type of migration. Sugar mills in the district typically commence production in June–July, making sugarcane harvesting peak between late May and July. Consequently, Mandya sees a significant influx of migrant laborers during this period. The authors collected data in June–July 2024 by visiting and interviewing migrant women at their workplaces.

Living Conditions and Health Challenges

Migrants to urban areas typically have access to some basic infrastructure, such as public toilets, dormitories, and other amenities. In contrast, migrants to rural areas often lack such facilities. In the absence of proper accommodation, migrants build temporary shelters or tents, especially during the monsoon season. This exposes them to seasonal diseases such as dengue, chickenpox, and typhoid fever.

The physically demanding nature of agricultural labor, particularly in sugarcane harvesting, leads to work-related health issues. For instance, 63.75% of migrant women (51 women) reported suffering from back pain. Migrants rely on nearby primary health centers to address their health concerns.

Recreational Activities and Substance Use

In their leisure time, migrant women engage in recreational activities such as singing folk songs and using mobile phones. However, substance use was observed among 65 women (54.16%). Many women consume substances like tobacco or alcohol to alleviate physical fatigue, often unaware of the associated health risks.

Language and Cultural Barriers

In Ganadalu village, language differences create challenges for migrant families. Migrants from Bellary district speak a mix of Telugu and Kannada, while those from Tamil Nadu predominantly speak Tamil. The local language, Kannada, acts as a barrier to effective communication, sometimes leading to conflicts with local residents. Additionally, language barriers have caused migrant women to encounter difficulties in their daily activities.

Economic Dependence and Wages

A mason serves as an informal supervisor for migrant families in

Ganadalu village. In many cases, this person collects wages from landowners and distributes them to the laborers. However, 114 women (95%) reported that they do not receive wages directly. Instead, wages are handed over to male relatives, such as husbands, fathers, or in-laws. This practice perpetuates the economic dependence of migrant women, preventing them from achieving financial autonomy.

Migrant women workers play a significant role in agricultural production activities; however, their participation largely remains invisible. In contemporary society, their contributions are neither adequately recognized nor properly valued. Although migrant women workers play a crucial role in sugarcane cultivation activities in Mandya district, nearly 95% of them are unable to receive their wages directly from the landowners. This situation reflects their limited ability to make decisions at the household level. As a result, women's public participation and empowerment remain weak and constrained.

Wage discrimination, exclusion of migrant women workers from local governance systems, and the lack of access to basic amenities such as sanitation facilities, safe drinking water, and healthcare services are clear indicators of prevailing gender inequality and systemic marginalization. The genuine empowerment of migrant women workers cannot be achieved merely through their physical presence in the workforce; rather, it requires ensuring their direct access to economic resources, legal protection, social security, and active participation in local governance.

To achieve this goal, it is essential to build supportive institutional mechanisms for women workers, from the Gram Panchayat level to the national level. This is not only the responsibility of the government but also a social obligation of every citizen.

Impact on Children's Education

Most migrant families have school-aged children whose education is adversely affected by migration. While these children are not involved in sugarcane harvesting, their educational needs remain unmet. It is recommended that local organizations work toward providing educational support to these children.

Nutritional Deficiencies

All migrant women reported not consuming nutritious food, which further exacerbates their health challenges.

Conclusion

Migration for economic reasons often exposes individuals and families to numerous hardships, especially when faced with limited opportunities. Migrant women, in particular, experience a range of unique, complex challenges that differ significantly from those faced by men. Health issues, both physical and mental, are significant concerns for migrant women, compounded by poor living conditions and inadequate personal hygiene. Exploitation by supervisors and landowners, as well as neglect by authorities, exacerbates their plight. While voluntary organizations have made efforts to improve the welfare of migrant women, much work remains to achieve meaningful and sustainable progress in addressing these challenges.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the successful completion of this research. This study would not have been possible without the cooperation and support of the women from 120 families who migrated from Bellary district, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, India, who generously provided the required data.

References

1. Kendre, B. (2011). Socio-economic background and seasonal migration of sugarcane harvesting workers. *International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 15–21.
2. Gaikwad, C., & Jadhav, S. (2017). Challenges faced by sugarcane mills and farmers in India. *International Journal of Science, Technology, and Management*, 6(2), 847–853.
3. Biswas, G., Bhattacharya, A., & Bhattacharya, R. (2016). A review on the occupational health of sugarcane workers. *International Journal of Biomedical Research*, 7(8), 568–570.
4. Nagesha, B., & Bhat, J. (2019). Migration of agricultural laborers in Karnataka: A study. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology*, 7(7), 1208–1213.
5. Patil, N. M. (2014). Study on general status of migratory sugarcane harvest workers of Ahmednagar District in Maharashtra. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 3(12), 2609–2611.

Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

About the License:

© The Authors 2024. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.