

Migration, Marginalization and Survival: A Study of Migrant Women Living under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata

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Abstract: Internal migration has become a major feature of India's urbanization. Although migration may provide access to employment, it often produces insecure work, homelessness, and social exclusion among economically disadvantaged households. Women migrants are particularly vulnerable because gender inequality intersects with poverty, informal employment, lack of documentation, and inadequate housing. This study examines the migration experiences, livelihoods, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies of migrant women living under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata. The study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological, and participatory research design. A complete enumeration of 45 migrant households comprising 211 individuals, including 96 women and adolescent girls, was undertaken. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and participant observation. Thematic analysis was used to interpret migration trajectories, livelihood patterns, access to services, gender-based violence, and coping mechanisms.

The findings indicate that poverty, unemployment, landlessness, indebtedness, declining agricultural opportunities, and family distress were the principal causes of migration. After arriving in Kolkata, most women entered low-paid informal occupations such as domestic work, rag picking, vending, waste recycling, and daily wage labour. However, insecure employment and the absence of affordable housing compelled families to remain under the flyover. Women faced inadequate sanitation, unsafe living conditions, limited healthcare, exclusion from welfare schemes, domestic violence, harassment, and fear of trafficking. The absence of identity documents and proof of residence further restricted their access to food security, education, healthcare, and social protection.

Despite these hardships, women demonstrated resilience through collective support, shared childcare, informal borrowing, information exchange, and mutual assistance during illness and violence. The study argues that migration, gender, and urban poverty must be addressed together through gender-responsive migration policies, affordable housing, portable welfare benefits, accessible documentation, livelihood security, and rights-based urban governance.

Keywords: Women and Migration, Internal Migration, Migrant Women, Urban Homelessness, Gender, Marginalization, Informal Livelihoods, Kolkata.

Introduction:

Migration is a significant feature of contemporary urbanization. In India, millions of people move from rural to urban areas because of poverty, unemployment, landlessness, environmental distress, indebtedness, and limited livelihood opportunities. Migration can improve household income and provide access to urban labour markets; however, its benefits are unequally distributed. Poor migrants frequently enter informal employment and live in insecure settlements without adequate access to housing or public services (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022).

Women form an important part of India's internal migration streams. Although female migration was traditionally associated mainly with marriage, women increasingly migrate independently or with their families for employment. They work in domestic service, construction, caregiving, waste collection, vending, and other informal activities. These occupations are generally characterized by low wages, irregular employment, limited bargaining power, and little social protection (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; Mazumdar et al., 2013).

The experience of migrant women cannot be understood only through economic factors. Gender, class, caste, ethnicity, migration status, and poverty interact to create distinctive patterns of disadvantage. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality is useful for analysing how overlapping forms of inequality shape women's access to work, housing, safety, healthcare, and legal rights. For women living in pavement settlements, these disadvantages are intensified by homelessness, insecure livelihoods, lack of privacy, and institutional invisibility.

Rapid urbanization has increased the demand for low-cost labour in cities such as Kolkata. Migrants contribute to domestic work, construction, transport, waste recycling, petty trade, and other sectors that sustain urban life. Yet affordable housing has not expanded at the same pace as employment opportunities. Many poor migrant families therefore reside in slums, railway areas, pavements, and under flyovers. In such spaces, homelessness involves more than the absence of a permanent dwelling; it also includes insecure tenure, inadequate sanitation, unsafe surroundings, and exclusion from urban services (Bhan, 2009; Tipple & Speak, 2005).

Women experience homelessness differently from men. The absence of secure shelter exposes them to sexual harassment, domestic violence, trafficking, reproductive health risks, and poor sanitation. Bathing, changing clothes, managing menstruation, breastfeeding, childcare, and sleeping often take place in public or semi-public spaces. The lack of a permanent address also creates difficulties in obtaining identity documents, ration cards, healthcare, education, banking facilities, and social security benefits (Khosla, 2015).

The Hastings Flyover in Kolkata is one such site of informal settlement. Migrant families have lived beneath the flyover for extended periods, depending on the surrounding informal economy. Although the settlement provides proximity to employment, it lacks secure housing, sanitation, electricity, safe drinking water, waste management, and institutional support. Migrant women living there represent the intersection of rural distress, urban poverty, informal labour, gender inequality, and homelessness.

Existing research has examined migration, informal employment, housing deprivation, and homelessness, but these issues are often studied separately. Less attention has been given to the lived experiences of migrant women who remain homeless after migrating to a metropolitan city. This study addresses that gap by examining the migration histories, livelihoods, vulnerabilities, access to services, and survival strategies of women living under the Hastings Flyover.

Review of Literature:

Migration is widely understood as a livelihood strategy adopted by households facing poverty, unemployment, environmental stress, and social exclusion. Internal migration supplies labour to urban economies but does not necessarily lead to social mobility. Poor migrants often enter informal employment, where wages are low and employment is irregular (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009).

The character of female migration in India has changed over time. In addition to marriage-related movement, women now migrate because of economic hardship and the need to support household survival. Women migrants commonly work in domestic service, construction, caregiving, waste collection, vending, and other occupations with limited labour protection. Their economic contribution remains undervalued, while their unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities continue after migration (ILO, 2021; Mazumdar et al., 2013).

Intersectionality provides an important framework for analysing migrant women's experiences. Gender inequality interacts with poverty, class, caste, ethnicity, and migration status. These overlapping conditions influence the type of work available to women, their access to housing and services, and their exposure to exploitation and violence (Crenshaw, 1989).

Homelessness in developing countries includes not only the lack of shelter but also insecure tenure, inadequate housing, and exclusion from essential services. Rapid urbanization, high rents, and limited affordable housing force many migrant households to live in informal settlements and public spaces. Such communities often remain outside formal planning systems and are vulnerable to eviction and institutional neglect (Bhan, 2009; Tipple & Speak, 2005).

Homeless women face particular risks. The absence of privacy and sanitation affects their health and dignity, while exposure to public spaces increases the risk of harassment, sexual violence, trafficking, and exploitation. Women also carry the primary responsibility for childcare, food preparation, and household management, even

when they are engaged in paid work. These conditions create a double burden of paid and unpaid labour (ActionAid India, 2016; Bhattacharjee & Kundu, 2014).

Documentation is another major issue. Welfare programmes and public services frequently require proof of identity and residence. Homeless migrants, who may lack both, can be excluded from food distribution, education, healthcare, banking, pensions, and other benefits. Legal invisibility therefore becomes a mechanism through which poverty and homelessness are reproduced (Chatterjee & Mehta, 2020).

Urban citizenship is also closely linked to property ownership and formal residence. Pavement dwellers and homeless migrants contribute to city economies but are often excluded from planning, housing rights, and decision-making. Their lack of recognized residence makes them socially and institutionally invisible (Roy, 2003).

Although these studies provide important insights, limited research has examined migrant women who live permanently under flyovers or on pavements. The present study contributes to the literature by linking migration, gender, homelessness, informal employment, and social exclusion through the lived experiences of women in Kolkata.

Research Gap:

Research on internal migration in India has largely focused on labour mobility, economic development, and urbanization. Studies of homelessness have concentrated on housing deprivation, informal settlements, urban governance, and access to services. Similarly, studies of migrant women have often examined marriage migration, domestic work, or informal employment. These approaches provide valuable information but do not fully explain how migration, gender, and homelessness interact.

There is limited qualitative research on women who migrate because of poverty, unemployment, environmental distress, and family hardship and subsequently become homeless in urban areas. Existing studies document violence, poor sanitation, health problems, and livelihood insecurity among homeless women, but they pay less attention to the ways in which migration shapes these vulnerabilities.

The voices of women living under flyovers and on urban pavements are particularly underrepresented. Macro-level data may identify migration and homelessness as social problems, but they seldom reveal how women negotiate daily survival, care responsibilities, insecurity, and institutional exclusion. This study addresses the gap by examining the experiences of migrant women residing under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the socio-demographic and migration profile of women living under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata.
- 2) To identify the major push and pull factors influencing rural-to-urban migration among migrant women.
- 3) To explore the livelihood strategies and socio-economic conditions of migrant women in the urban informal economy.
- 4) To analyse the gender-specific challenges experienced by migrant women, including homelessness, violence, inadequate access to healthcare, sanitation, education, and social protection.
- 5) To understand the coping mechanisms and survival strategies adopted by migrant women in conditions of chronic urban marginalization.
- 6) To suggest policy measures for promoting the social inclusion, livelihood security, and welfare of migrant women in urban areas.

Research Methodology:

Research Design: The study adopted a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. This approach was appropriate because the study focused on women lived experiences of migration, homelessness, informal employment, insecurity, and exclusion. It allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and helped the researcher understand the meanings they attached to displacement and survival.

Study Area: The study was conducted under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata, West Bengal. Hastings is connected to the Kolkata Port, transport routes, commercial establishments, and government offices. These economic activities attract low-income workers. The informal settlement under the flyover lacks secure housing, sanitation, potable water, electricity, and systematic waste management.

Study Population: The study population consisted of migrant women living under the Hastings Flyover. Respondents had migrated from rural areas of West Bengal and neighbouring states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha. Poverty, unemployment, landlessness, family distress, declining agricultural livelihoods, and indebtedness were among the reasons for migration.

Sampling and Sample Size: Because the settlement was relatively small, complete enumeration was used. All 45 migrant households were included. These households comprised 211 individuals, including 96 women

and adolescent girls. The inclusion of all households reduced sampling bias and provided a comprehensive account of the settlement.

Sources of Data: Primary data were collected through fieldwork. Secondary information was obtained from books, journal articles, government publications, census reports, policy documents, and reports concerning migration, gender, homelessness, urban poverty, and informal employment.

Methods of Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrant women to document their migration histories, reasons for migration, occupations, access to services, experiences of violence, and survival strategies.

Focus group discussions explored shared experiences of housing insecurity, employment, safety, sanitation, community support, and welfare access.

Key informant interviews were held with community leaders, social workers, NGO representatives, and other individuals familiar with the settlement.

Participant observation was used to record housing conditions, sanitation, livelihood activities, community relationships, and environmental risks. Field notes supplemented the interview and discussion data.

Data Analysis: Data were transcribed, translated where necessary, coded, and organized thematically. Major themes included migration, livelihood insecurity, homelessness, gender-based violence, institutional exclusion, access to welfare, resilience, and collective survival. The findings were interpreted using the concepts of gender and intersectionality.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying information. Interviews dealing with violence and personal hardship were conducted with sensitivity and respect.

Limitations of the Study: The study is limited to migrant women living under the Hastings Flyover and cannot be statistically generalized to all migrant or homeless populations. Its qualitative design prioritizes depth and lived experience rather than statistical measurement. Nevertheless, the findings offer valuable insights into the relationship between migration, homelessness, gender, and urban exclusion.

Results and Discussion:

Migration Profile of the Respondents

All 45 households included in the study were migrant families. Most had migrated from economically disadvantaged areas of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha. Migration was mainly a response to

poverty and insecurity rather than a voluntary search for personal advancement. Respondents identified unemployment, landlessness, indebtedness, declining agricultural productivity, natural disasters, and family distress as major reasons for leaving their villages.

For most women, migration was a household survival strategy. Families moved to Kolkata hoping to obtain regular employment, but the absence of affordable housing forced them to live beneath the flyover. What was initially viewed as temporary accommodation gradually became a long-term or permanent residence. Migration therefore provided access to the city's labour market without providing secure citizenship, housing, or social mobility.

Livelihood Patterns of Migrant Women

Before migration, many women were engaged in unpaid agricultural work, livestock care, forest-based activities, or domestic responsibilities. In Kolkata, they entered informal occupations requiring limited formal education or capital. Common occupations included domestic work, rag picking, waste recycling, petty vending, daily wage labour, and casual work in markets and nearby establishments.

Employment was irregular and poorly paid. Women often combined several income-generating activities while continuing to perform household work and childcare. They had no written contracts, paid leave, job security, or dependable access to social security. Earnings were frequently insufficient to meet food, healthcare, education, and housing expenses. This occupational insecurity contributed directly to their continued homelessness.

Migration and Urban Homelessness

The study found a close relationship between migration and homelessness. Low incomes, unstable employment, and high urban rents prevented households from entering the formal housing market. Families constructed makeshift shelters from tarpaulin, plastic sheets, bamboo, and discarded materials.

These shelters provided little protection from rain, heat, cold, pollution, or intrusion. During the monsoon, waterlogging damaged belongings and disrupted work and domestic activities. The settlement lacked adequate toilets, electricity, safe drinking water, and waste disposal. Women experienced particular hardship because domestic and reproductive activities had to be carried out without privacy.

Homelessness thus extended beyond the absence of a permanent house. It involved continuous insecurity, exposure to environmental hazards, lack of basic services, fear of eviction, and exclusion from urban planning.

Gendered Vulnerabilities in the Migration Process

Women experienced migration and homelessness through gendered forms of vulnerability. Lack of privacy was a major concern. Bathing, changing clothes, breastfeeding, and managing menstruation often occurred in

public or semi-public surroundings. These conditions caused embarrassment, discomfort, harassment, and health risks.

Domestic violence was also reported, often in connection with alcohol abuse among male household members. Women described verbal abuse, physical violence, stalking, harassment, and sexual intimidation in nearby public spaces. Mothers were particularly concerned about the safety of adolescent girls and sometimes restricted their mobility to protect them from sexual violence and trafficking.

These experiences demonstrate the relevance of intersectionality. Gender, poverty, migration status, homelessness, and lack of documentation did not operate independently; together they created cumulative and mutually reinforcing disadvantages.

Access to Welfare Services and Social Protection

Most respondents lacked permanent addresses or complete identity documents. This restricted their access to ration cards, government welfare schemes, healthcare, education, banking, and social security. Some women experienced difficulty obtaining Aadhaar cards and other documents because they could not provide proof of residence.

Healthcare access was limited despite frequent illness among women and children. Respondents often depended on charitable organizations, informal medicine sellers, or private practitioners. Pregnant women experienced particular difficulty accessing institutional maternal care.

Children's education was also affected. Documentation requirements, residential instability, poverty, and mobility created barriers to school admission and continuity. These difficulties show how the absence of legal recognition can exclude entire families from basic citizenship rights.

Survival Strategies and Women's Resilience

Despite severe hardship, migrant women demonstrated resilience and agency. They contributed to household survival through paid work, domestic labour, childcare, and management of limited resources. Women also created informal networks of mutual support.

They shared food, cared for one another's children, lent small amounts of money, exchanged information about employment, and assisted neighbours during illness or family crises. Older women sometimes mediated disputes, while neighbours offered temporary shelter and emotional support. These practices operated as an informal social protection system in the absence of reliable institutional assistance.

The findings challenge portrayals of homeless migrant women as passive victims. Although constrained by poverty and exclusion, they actively negotiated urban life, organized household survival, and supported one another.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that migration does not automatically lead to improved living conditions. For poor women, migration may replace rural poverty with urban informal employment, insecure housing, and institutional exclusion. Structural inequalities present before migration continue after arrival and are reproduced through the urban labour and housing markets.

Migration must therefore be understood as an ongoing process rather than a single movement between two places. Women's experiences are shaped by conditions in their villages, recruitment and employment arrangements, access to housing in the city, and their ability to obtain documents and services.

At the same time, the study highlights women's collective strength. Their mutual assistance and daily problem-solving reveal significant agency. Effective policy must therefore address both vulnerability and capacity. Migrant women require protection from violence and exploitation, but they must also be recognized as workers, caregivers, citizens, and participants in urban decision-making.

Policy Recommendations:

The following measures are proposed:

- 1) **Gender-responsive migration support:** Migration Resource Centres should be established in source and destination areas to provide information on employment, legal rights, social security, healthcare, and grievance redressal. Special support should be offered to single women, widows, female-headed households, and women migrating with children.
- 2) **Affordable housing and safe shelters:** Urban authorities should expand affordable rental housing and establish women-friendly shelters with sanitation, childcare, drinking water, healthcare, and security. Shelters should support long-term rehabilitation rather than provide only temporary accommodation.
- 3) **Accessible documentation and portable welfare:** Procedures for obtaining identity documents should accept alternative forms of residence verification. Food security, healthcare, pensions, and social protection should be portable across states and accessible at migrants' current place of residence.
- 4) **Livelihood promotion:** Skill development should focus on locally viable activities such as tailoring, food processing, caregiving, recycling, handicrafts, digital services, and small enterprise. Women should be linked with Self-Help Groups, urban livelihood missions, credit facilities, and market opportunities.
- 5) **Protection of informal workers:** Domestic workers, waste pickers, street vendors, and casual labourers should be registered and provided with social security, occupational safety, fair wages, and grievance mechanisms.

- 6) **Healthcare and reproductive services:** Mobile clinics should regularly visit informal settlements. Services should include maternal healthcare, reproductive healthcare, immunization, nutrition, mental health counselling, and menstrual hygiene support.
- 7) **Education for migrant children:** Schools should adopt flexible admission procedures and avoid excluding children because of missing documents. Bridge courses, remedial education, language support, and community learning centres should be provided where necessary.
- 8) **Prevention of gender-based violence:** Legal aid, counselling, gender-sensitive policing, community help desks, and referral services should be strengthened. Officials and frontline workers should be trained to respond appropriately to domestic violence, harassment, trafficking, and workplace exploitation.
- 9) **Participatory urban governance:** Migrant women should be included in planning decisions concerning housing, sanitation, livelihoods, safety, and welfare. Local governments should collaborate with women's groups, community organizations, and civil society institutions.
- 10) **Inter-state coordination and rights-based policy:** Source and destination states should coordinate labour registration, data sharing, welfare portability, and service delivery. Migration policy should recognize women as equal citizens entitled to housing, healthcare, education, livelihood, safety, and dignity.

Conclusion:

This study examined the experiences of migrant women living under the Hastings Flyover in Kolkata. The findings show that migration was primarily a survival response to rural poverty, unemployment, landlessness, indebtedness, environmental distress, and limited livelihood opportunities. Although migration enabled access to the urban labour market, it did not produce secure housing or economic mobility. Most women remained in low-paid informal employment and continued to live in conditions of homelessness and insecurity.

Migrant women faced overlapping forms of marginalization. Lack of housing, sanitation, healthcare, education, documentation, and social protection was intensified by gender-based violence, harassment, reproductive health risks, trafficking concerns, and unpaid care responsibilities. These experiences demonstrate that migration is a gendered process shaped by intersecting social and economic inequalities.

The study also reveals women's resilience and agency. Women supported household survival through informal work, domestic labour, childcare, resource management, and mutual assistance. Their networks provided food, information, emergency loans, childcare, emotional support, and protection. Recognizing these capacities is essential for developing policies that move beyond portraying migrant women solely as victims.

The study contributes to research on women and migration by showing that migration, homelessness, informal employment, and gender-based exclusion are interconnected. Addressing these problems requires coordinated interventions involving affordable housing, safe migration, portable welfare, accessible identity documents,

livelihood security, gender-sensitive healthcare, education, protection from violence, and participatory urban governance.

Although the research is limited to one settlement, its findings have wider implications for metropolitan cities where migrant women sustain urban economies while remaining excluded from basic rights and services. Inclusive urban development requires recognizing migrant women as workers and equal citizens rather than invisible inhabitants of the urban margins. Migration can become a pathway to dignity and empowerment only when accompanied by social protection, housing security, institutional recognition, and gender justice.

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