

Identity and Social Mobility of Interstate Women Migrants: A Study in Kerala

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Abstract:

Migration has been a significant aspect of human history since ancient times. People have historically moved, either individually or in groups, for various reasons ranging from economic to socio-political factors. Interstate women labourers migrate to Kerala primarily by family reasons and also in search of better employment opportunities and higher wages. However, Interstate women migrants face significant challenges in Kerala, including gender-based discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay for equal work, and language barriers that hinder their integration and access to services. Despite Kerala's progressive labour policies and schemes aimed at supporting inter-state migrant labourers, these initiatives often fall short in effectively addressing the unique needs of women migrants. This study aims to explore the identity and social mobility of inter-state women migrants in Kerala, focusing on their experiences and challenges. It investigates how gender and migration intersect to shape the lives of these women and examines the effectiveness of existing policies in supporting their social and economic integration.

Keywords: Interstate Migration, Women, Kerala, Social mobility

Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the most significant socio-economic phenomena in the contemporary world, closely associated with globalization and urbanization. The International Organization for Migration defines migration as the movement of people from one place to another for temporary or permanent settlement, usually influenced by economic, social, political, or environmental factors (International Organization for Migration, 2020). In India, interstate migration has increased considerably due to regional disparities in employment opportunities, poverty, industrialization, and labour demand. Kerala has become one of the major destinations for migrant labourers because of its higher wage structure, improved living conditions, and shortage of local labour in several sectors (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019).

In recent years, the feminization of migration has become an important area of academic discussion. Earlier migration studies largely considered migration as a male-dominated phenomenon; however, women are increasingly migrating independently as workers, caregivers, and contributors to household survival strategies (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Interstate women migrants in Kerala are primarily engaged in informal sectors such as construction work, domestic labour, hotel services, and other low-paid occupations. Despite their growing participation in the labour force, migrant women often remain socially invisible and economically vulnerable because of poor working conditions, lack of social security, language barriers, and limited access to welfare schemes.

Several researchers have examined migration patterns, labour conditions, and the socio-economic contributions of migrant workers in Kerala. Studies conducted by Centre for Development Studies have highlighted the increasing dependence of Kerala's economy on interstate migrant labour and the precarious conditions faced by migrant workers (Rajan & Saxena, 2020). Similarly, studies on gender and migration have emphasized that women migrants frequently experience multiple forms of marginalization based on gender, class, and migrant status (Crenshaw, 1989). Existing literature also indicates that migrant women working in informal sectors often face labour exploitation, wage inequality, insecure housing conditions, and social exclusion (Bhagat, 2012).

The present study aims to examine the Identity and social mobility of interstate women migrants in Kerala the study seeks to analyse the socio-economic conditions of migrant women, the factors influencing migration, workplace experiences, and the extent to which migration contributes to economic empowerment and social transformation among women migrants. The study attempts to provide meaningful insights into the gendered dimensions of interstate migration and its implications for identity and social mobility in contemporary Kerala society.

Review of Literature

Migration has become one of the most significant dimensions of socio-economic transformation in contemporary India, particularly in relation to labour mobility, urbanization, and regional economic disparities. Studies on interstate migration in India reveal that migration is primarily influenced by poverty, unemployment, agrarian crisis, and unequal patterns of regional development (Bhagat, 2012). Migration is increasingly associated with informal labour sectors where migrant workers experience insecure employment, poor living conditions, and limited access to social protection mechanisms. Earlier migration studies largely perceived migration as a male-dominated phenomenon, while women were mostly considered dependent migrants accompanying family members. However, later studies challenged this assumption and emphasized the growing feminization of migration. Deshingkar and Akter (2009) observed that women increasingly migrate independently or as part of household survival strategies due to economic insecurity, limited employment opportunities, and changing labour demands. Chant and Radcliffe (1992) similarly argued that migration significantly transforms women's social and economic roles by increasing their participation in income generation and decision-making processes within households. At the same time, women migrants continue to face structural inequalities, labour exploitation, and patriarchal restrictions despite their economic contributions.

Research relating to migration in Kerala has mainly focused on the increasing dependence of Kerala's economy on interstate migrant labourers. Studies conducted by Centre for Development Studies highlighted that Kerala has become one of the major destinations for interstate migrant workers because of higher wages, labour shortages, and expanding employment opportunities in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and informal services (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). These studies observed that migrant workers contribute significantly to Kerala's labour economy while simultaneously experiencing social exclusion, poor housing facilities, occupational insecurity, and lack of welfare access. Rajan and Saxena (2020) further pointed out that interstate migrant workers in Kerala often remain excluded from institutional support systems because of administrative barriers, linguistic differences, and the informal nature of their employment.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), through the concept of intersectionality, argued that social inequalities cannot be understood through a single category such as gender alone because different forms of marginalization intersect simultaneously. This perspective is highly relevant in understanding the experiences of interstate women

migrants whose lives are shaped by the intersection of gender, class, migration status, language, and occupational vulnerability. Women migrants working in informal sectors frequently experience multiple forms of exclusion including wage discrimination, insecure working conditions, social invisibility, and restricted access to welfare schemes. Breman (2013) observed that informal labour structures in India create conditions of economic insecurity and social vulnerability, particularly among migrant women workers who occupy low-paid and precarious occupations. In migration contexts, migrant workers are often perceived as “outsiders” because of differences in language, culture, ethnicity, and regional background. Such social categorization may lead to exclusion, stereotyping, and difficulties in social integration. Interstate women migrants in Kerala frequently encounter language barriers and limited interaction with local communities, which further intensify their experiences of social marginalization.

Migration studies have also explored the relationship between migration and social mobility. Sorokin (1959) explained that social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups from one socio-economic position to another within society. Many migrant women continue to experience social exclusion, occupational insecurity, and identity-based discrimination despite achieving limited economic improvement.

Understanding Interstate Migration

Individuals derive their identity and sense of self from the social groups to which they belong, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, language, nationality, caste, and occupation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The authors argue that identity is not merely personal or individualistic but socially constructed through interaction with society and institutional structures. Accordingly, society is divided into “in-groups” and “out-groups.” Individuals belonging to dominant social groups are generally recognized as legitimate members of society and enjoy greater social acceptance, opportunities, and power. In contrast, marginalized groups often experience exclusion, discrimination, stereotyping, and social invisibility. These social categorizations shape the everyday experiences of individuals and influence their access to resources, opportunities, and social participation.

In the context of interstate migration, migrant women are frequently perceived as “outsiders” because of differences in language, cultural practices, regional identity, food habits, and social background. Interstate women migrants in Kerala, particularly those coming from states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, and Jharkhand, often encounter difficulties in integrating into the local socio-cultural environment. Language barriers significantly affect communication and limit their interaction with local communities, employers, and state institutions. Their migrant identity often places them in a socially vulnerable position within Kerala’s labour market and society.

Social Identity Theory explains how migrant women negotiate identity within a new social environment while simultaneously maintaining connections with their native cultural identity. Migration creates both opportunities and challenges for identity transformation. On the one hand, migration may lead to economic independence, increased self-confidence, and exposure to new social experiences. On the other hand, migrant women may experience alienation, social exclusion, and stigmatization because of their status as migrant labourers.

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) argues that oppression and marginalization cannot be understood through a single social category alone. Women migrants experience discrimination not merely because they are women but also because of their economic condition, migrant status, regional identity, linguistic background, and employment in informal sectors. These multiple forms of inequality intersect with one another and create unique patterns of disadvantage and vulnerability. In the context of Kerala, interstate women migrants often occupy low-paid and insecure occupations such as construction work, domestic labour,

hotel work, caregiving, and other informal sector jobs. These occupations are characterized by poor working conditions, wage inequality, absence of social security, and lack of legal protection. Women migrants are therefore positioned at the intersection of gender exploitation and labour exploitation. Intersectionality Theory helps explain how these forms of inequality operate simultaneously rather than independently. For example, a woman migrant employed in the construction sector may experience exploitation because she is a woman, because she is poor, because she is a migrant, and because she works within the informal labour economy. These identities and conditions intersect to shape her social reality and determine her access to opportunities and rights.

Migration is often associated with aspirations for upward mobility and improved living conditions (Sorokin, 1959). Many interstate women migrate to Kerala because of poverty, unemployment, low wages, indebtedness, agricultural decline, and lack of livelihood opportunities in their native regions. Kerala attracts migrant workers due to comparatively higher wages, labour shortages, and increasing demand for workers in sectors such as construction, domestic work, hospitality, and informal services. Economic mobility among migrant women may be reflected in increased earnings, better housing conditions, improved nutrition, access to healthcare, financial independence, and educational opportunities for children. Migration may also contribute to women's empowerment by increasing their participation in income generation and household decision-making processes.

However, the theory also recognizes that economic advancement does not necessarily guarantee social equality or inclusion. Migrant women may achieve financial improvement while continuing to experience social exclusion, discrimination, and insecurity. Many women migrants continue to live in poor housing conditions, lack social protection, and remain vulnerable to exploitation despite earning better wages than in their native places. Thus, mobility may be economic in nature without corresponding social recognition or dignity.

The theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it helps evaluate the extent to which migration transforms women's social and economic position. It enables the researcher to examine whether migration results in sustainable upward mobility or merely temporary economic survival within precarious labour conditions. The theory also helps analyse the contradictions between economic mobility and social marginalization among interstate women migrants in Kerala.

Results And Discussion

Interstate women migrants constitute an increasingly significant segment within Kerala's informal labour economy, particularly in sectors such as construction work, domestic labour, hospitality services, and other forms of precarious employment. The findings reveal that migration has produced substantial changes in the economic conditions and social experiences of migrant women while simultaneously exposing them to multiple forms of structural inequality and marginalization. Migration emerges not merely as an economic process but as a complex social phenomenon shaped by gender relations, labour structures, identity formation, and socio-economic vulnerability.

A considerable proportion of the respondents migrated to Kerala along with their families, indicating that women's migration is closely connected with household survival strategies and collective economic decision-making processes. Family-based migration reflects the growing economic participation of women within migrant households and demonstrates that women increasingly contribute to sustaining household income and livelihood security. At the same time, the predominance of family migration also illustrates the continuing influence of patriarchal social structures in shaping women's mobility and migration decisions. Migration with

family members often provides emotional security, social support, and a degree of protection within unfamiliar socio-cultural environments.

Economic insecurity, unemployment, indebtedness, and limited livelihood opportunities in the native regions emerged as the primary factors influencing migration among respondents. Kerala's comparatively higher wages and increasing labour demand within informal sectors function as important pull factors attracting migrant workers from economically disadvantaged states. Aspirations for improved living conditions and financial stability further influenced migration decisions among women migrants. Educational opportunities, however, did not emerge as a significant motivating factor, reflecting the restricted educational and professional mobility available to many women within marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. Migration therefore appears to be primarily associated with economic survival and household sustenance rather than long-term professional advancement.

Occupational patterns among respondents reveal a significant concentration of interstate women migrants within low-paid and insecure informal labour sectors. Construction work constituted the dominant occupation among respondents, followed by domestic labour, hotel services, and other forms of unorganized employment. These occupations are characterized by irregular wages, physically demanding labour, inadequate workplace protections, and absence of social security mechanisms. Women employed within construction work frequently reported exposure to occupational health risks, long working hours, and economic insecurity. Similarly, women engaged in domestic labour and hospitality services experienced exploitative working conditions, limited institutional support, and restricted occupational mobility.

Such occupational concentration highlights the gendered nature of informal labour markets where women migrants are disproportionately employed within socially undervalued and economically vulnerable occupations. Informal employment structures reproduce patterns of labour exploitation by denying workers stable employment conditions, legal protection, and welfare benefits. In addition to economic vulnerability, gender-based discrimination remains a persistent feature of migrant women's labour experiences. Unequal wages, discriminatory treatment, and restricted opportunities for occupational advancement were frequently reported by respondents. These findings indicate that women migrants experience overlapping forms of inequality shaped by gender, class position, and migrant status within informal labour economies.

Identity-related challenges constitute another significant dimension of migrant women's experiences within Kerala society. Linguistic differences emerged as one of the major barriers affecting communication, workplace interaction, and access to institutional services. Inability to communicate effectively in the local language often limited migrant women's interaction with employers, public institutions, and local communities. Cultural differences and unfamiliar social environments further intensified feelings of alienation and social isolation among respondents. Many women reported that they were frequently perceived as "outsiders" because of differences in language, regional identity, dress, and cultural practices.

These experiences reflect broader processes of social categorization and exclusion operating within host societies. Migrant identity significantly influences patterns of social interaction, belonging, and institutional inclusion. Several respondents reported limited awareness regarding welfare schemes, labour rights, and government support mechanisms because of communication barriers and inadequate dissemination of information. Social exclusion was therefore experienced not only within workplaces but also within public and institutional spaces. Such findings indicate that migration influence's identity formation and social belonging alongside economic conditions.

Despite these challenges, migration has contributed to certain forms of economic mobility and financial transformation among interstate women migrants. Employment opportunities in Kerala enabled many respondents to earn comparatively higher wages than those available in their native places. Increased income contributed to improved household sustenance, repayment of debts, enhanced food security, and greater financial stability among migrant families. Financial contribution to household income also increased women's participation in family decision-making processes and enhanced their economic significance within households. Migration thus functions as an important mechanism of livelihood security and limited financial empowerment among women migrants.

However, economic advancement did not necessarily translate into social inclusion or improved quality of life. Many respondents continued to reside in overcrowded and inadequate housing conditions with limited access to sanitation, healthcare facilities, and social welfare support. Occupational insecurity and absence of institutional protection remained persistent concerns despite improved income opportunities. Economic mobility therefore appears partial and uneven, constrained by structural inequalities embedded within labour markets and social institutions. The findings suggest that financial improvement alone is insufficient to ensure dignity, social recognition, and long-term security for migrant women.

The experiences of Interstate women migrants reveal the interconnected relationship between migration, gender, labour exploitation, identity, and social mobility. Women migrants contribute significantly to Kerala's labour economy, particularly within sectors that rely heavily upon migrant labour. Nevertheless, their contributions frequently remain socially invisible and institutionally neglected. Migration has undoubtedly created opportunities for economic participation and limited financial empowerment, yet structural inequalities relating to gender, migration status, and informal labour conditions continue to shape the lived realities of migrant women.

Processes of empowerment and marginalization therefore coexist within the migration experience. While migration provides opportunities for income generation and household survival, migrant women continue to experience social exclusion, occupational vulnerability, and identity-based discrimination within the host society. These findings highlight the necessity for gender-sensitive migration policies, stronger labour protections, inclusive welfare mechanisms, and socially responsive institutional frameworks capable of addressing the complex challenges experienced by interstate women migrants in Kerala.

Conclusion

The study was undertaken with the objective of examining the identity and social mobility of interstate women migrants in Kerala with special reference to Calicut district. The research primarily sought to analyse the socio-economic conditions of interstate women migrants, the factors influencing migration, the nature of their labour participation, and the ways in which migration shapes their identity, social experiences, and mobility within the host society. By situating women's migration within broader debates concerning gender, labour, migration, and social exclusion, the study attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived realities of interstate women migrants within Kerala's informal labour economy.

The findings of the study indicate that interstate women migrants constitute a significant yet socially marginalized section within Kerala's labour structure. Migration among women was found to be closely associated with household survival strategies, economic insecurity, and aspirations for improved living conditions. A substantial proportion of women migrants were engaged within informal sectors such as construction work, domestic labour, hospitality services, and other forms of precarious employment characterized by occupational insecurity, irregular wages, and lack of institutional protection. Although

migration created opportunities for income generation and financial contribution within households, women migrants continued to experience multiple forms of vulnerability arising from gender inequality, informal labour conditions, and migrant status.

The study further revealed that identity-related challenges occupy a central position within the migration experiences of interstate women migrants. Linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and regional distinctions frequently contributed to experiences of exclusion, social alienation, and restricted participation within local communities and institutional structures. Migrant women often remained excluded from welfare mechanisms and social protection systems due to limited awareness, communication barriers, and inadequate institutional accessibility. These findings demonstrate that migration influences not only economic conditions but also social belonging, recognition, and identity formation among women migrants.

Another important finding emerging from the study is that economic mobility among interstate women migrants remains limited and uneven in nature. While employment opportunities in Kerala contributed to improved income and financial stability to a certain extent, economic advancement did not necessarily ensure social inclusion, dignity, or long-term security. Many women migrants continued to experience poor housing conditions, insecure employment, and lack of welfare access despite their economic contribution to the labour economy. The study therefore highlights the contradiction between economic participation and continued social marginalization within migrant women's lives.

The broader implications of the study extend to discussions concerning migration governance, labour rights, gender justice, and inclusive development. The findings underline the necessity of adopting gender-sensitive and rights-based approaches within migration and labour policy frameworks. Institutional interventions aimed at migrant welfare must address not only economic concerns but also issues relating to social protection, occupational safety, healthcare accessibility, housing facilities, childcare support, and legal awareness among migrant women. The study also emphasizes the importance of strengthening welfare accessibility and ensuring effective implementation of labour protections within informal sectors that heavily depend upon migrant labour. Future research may also examine themes such as political participation among migrant women, access to education and healthcare, digital inclusion, legal awareness, social citizenship, and intergenerational mobility within migrant communities. Comparative studies examining the experiences of male and female migrant workers may further contribute to understanding gender disparities within labour migration. Longitudinal studies focusing on long-term social integration and identity transformation among migrant families would also provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of migration and social change in contemporary India.

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