

'Away From Home' - A Systematic Literature Review of the Factors and Challenges of Women Migration

Sana Tabassum

PhD Scholar

Department of Economics

Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, Kerala, India

E-mail: tabassumsana100@gmail.com

Alternate e-mail: sanat12fpm@iimk.ac.in

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Abstract

Feminization of Migration refers to the increasing participation of women in long-distance migration, a trend driven by the evolving gender dynamics in the workforce. This shift is characterized by the engagement of women in occupations traditionally perceived as feminine, demanding the presence of women in these sectors. Consequently, the concept of the "Feminization of Migration" has prompted a gender-focused perspective on migration, redirecting attention towards the rights and interests of women within migration streams. Global patterns of women's migration have undergone a transformation, moving beyond the traditional role of women migrating as dependents with their families. Instead, there is a notable trend of women migrating independently, driven by economic motives and assuming the role of primary breadwinners for their families. This shift has not only altered the landscape of migration but has also amplified the presence of women in migration literature and practical policies designed with a gender-responsive approach. In light of these developments, this paper aims to conduct a systematic literature review that explores the factors and challenges associated with women's migration.

Keywords: gender, women migrants, factors, challenges.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 has for the very first time recognized migration as a dynamic force of sustainable development for migrants and societies at large. Migration is a complex and a cross cutting phenomenon that requires a holistic approach to policy making as the economic, social and cultural landscape of host and source regions impact migration. Since the onset of the 19th century, migration has emerged as a widespread phenomenon worldwide. Europe, in particular, has attracted a substantial influx of migrant workers from developing regions such as Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. (Massey et al., 1993)

The discourse on migration encompasses two distinct perspectives regarding the driving forces behind international migration. One school of thought posits that economic, structural, and political factors play a pivotal role in propelling individuals to migrate across borders. Conversely, a different perspective contends that societal structures, incorporating migrant connections, and intermediaries such as employment agencies and advocacy groups, are the primary drivers of migration (de Haas et al., 2019). As time has progressed, international migration has experienced an escalation, witnessing an increasing number of migrants traversing vast distances. This phenomenon has contributed to the enrichment and diversification of both origin and destination countries, resulting in a complex tapestry of cultures and demographics (Arango, 2000). Migration scholars argue that the world is witnessing a phenomenon called "Globalization of Migration", defined as "many countries being affected by migration at the same time" (Castles & Miller, 1998). The migration scenario has undergone significant transformations since the conclusion of World War II, witnessing Europe's shift from predominantly a region of emigrants to becoming a nation abundant in immigrants (de Haas et al., 2019). The petroleum boom of the 1973 had turned the Gulf region into an immigration hotspot attracting migrants from oil-deficient Arab nations of Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines and African countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Fargues, 2011; Shah, 2013). The swift economic expansion in the East Asian countries led to the re-direction of Asian migration towards the new growth poles of Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea (Skeldon, 2006).

The World Migration Report 2020 highlighted global migration trends, revealing that the number of international migrants surged from an estimated 150 million in 2000 to 272 million in 2019—a remarkable 81.3 percent increase. In 2019, international migrants constituted 3.5 percent of the world's population. High-income countries were the primary destination for two-thirds of international migrants, with Asian and European nations hosting 61 percent. The United States topped the list of preferred destinations, followed by Germany, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Kingdom. South Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, collectively accounted for 40 percent, equivalent to 112 million international migrants in 2019 (United Nations, 2020). Beyond the transformation in migration patterns and trends, there is an enhancement in the skill and educational proficiencies of migrants, driven by the growing demand for skilled labor in the specialized labor markets of prosperous countries (de Haas et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the need for less skilled labor in sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, catering, and care work remains unabated (Czaika et al., 2018). Migration, an indispensable facet of the global social fabric, stands as a highly sought-after process and an inevitable phenomenon shaping the contemporary world.

1.1 Gender Perspectives of Migration

A key issue of migration literature that is gaining momentum in today's times is the notion of "Feminization of Migration", a process where migration affects male and female migrants differently and gender emerges as a crucial aspect of migration (Piper, 2008). The migration of women as independent labor migrants has experienced a substantial increase over the past few decades. The term "Feminization of Migration" emerged as a significant trend defining the era of migration in the latter part of the 20th century, reflecting the growing participation of women in labor migration to regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and Japan. (Castles & Miller, 1998). A path breaking work on women migration was authored by Mirjana Morokvasic in the year 1984, which shed light on the fact that women account for an increasing percentage of migratory discourses. International Organization for Migration (IOM) adopted the mandate for gender mainstreaming in the year 1995, the same year that it embraced its 'Towards 21 Century' agenda (Mahon, 2020). The concept of gendering at international organizations was taken up with the idea of bringing about gender equality at international organizations (Krook & True, 2012; Zwingel, 2012).

A gender norm is a vital feature that plays a key role in shaping the migration experiences of men and women. Feminization of Labor refers to the "*increase in women's long distance labor migration*" (Standing, 1989). The latter part of the 20th century observed a rise in female migration especially in Asia and female emigration became a characteristic feature of less developed economies of Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh (Dannecker, 2005). Women migration is increasingly career driven or talent driven migration, but most of the time it gets camouflaged as marriage migration, family migration, or trailers or global caretakers (Kerr et al., 2016; Heikkilä & Rauhut, 2015; Habti & Elo, 2019). Global economic restructuring has opened new avenues of employment for women especially in the increased demand for cheap workforce in export oriented and service sector units (Chattopadhyay, 1997). Migrant women are increasingly required in these sectors as they are cheaper than local women workforce and male migrants (Dannecker, 2005). Women migration is viewed as a win-win situation for both countries as women of the host country are free to undertake employment and the migrant women fill the absence of maternal care in these working women households (Mahon, 2020). The native women are able to secure their careers and also employ cheap labor for care activities and the migrant women are able to support families back home through remittances. As these migrant women are generally from low developed economies the exchange value of these remittances is good money at home and it improves their standard of living, giving their family access to quality education and health services. Feminization of migration is attributed to socio economic changes in migrant origin countries, changes in host country labor markets, improved human capital of women workers, absence of economic opportunities in home markets and changing social attitudes (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013).

Gender Equality at the heart of the 'Decent Work Campaign' organized by International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2008 shed light on the employment patterns of women migrant workers. Migrant women typically find themselves in roles aligned with traditional female occupations, encompassing caregiving, nursing, sanitation, domestic work, and engagement in low-skilled industries like hotels, catering, and entertainment (Bachan, 2018). In the manufacturing sector, women are often concentrated in tasks such as food processing, textile and garment production, and labor-intensive monotonous industrial processes (Ghosh, 2009). While women migrants undeniably play a significant role in migratory movements, their formidable contributions should be duly acknowledged. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the myriad challenges and hardships that these women migrants encounter as they strive to adapt and thrive in foreign countries. Their efforts are indeed commendable, but it's important to highlight the obstacles they face in their journey as migrants in unfamiliar territories.

2. Women Migration in Asia

The Asian context is an interesting landscape to study female migration as Feminization of migration is more pronounced in Asia. Asian women are increasingly moving as autonomous migrants rather than dependents or associational migrants. Asian women migrants are a classic example of the dilemma that women face when they pursue economic independence (Bachan, 2018; Pande, 2022) but are met with cross border and cross country restrictions, the plight of Asian women migrants has called for global action for migrant women's' rights to safety (Lim & Oishi, 1996). Women migrants typically find themselves positioned at two different points along the skilled employment continuum. On one end, they are often engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled labor roles, encompassing occupations such as domestic work, caregiving, and service sectors like eateries and hotels. On the other end of the spectrum, women migrants are also employed in skilled labor industries, holding positions such as doctors, nurses, and teachers.

2.1 The Indian Landscape

Indian subcontinent is the largest immigrant sending country with one in every twenty international migrants born in India (Pande, 2022). United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, United States of America, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and Kuwait are the top destination countries for Indian women migrants (United Nations, 2019). The Southern Indian state of Kerala is the highest labor sending region to the Gulf countries of UAE and Saudi Arabia which accounts for more than two-thirds of all emigrants to the Gulf from across the globe (Zachariah et al., 2004). A primary study conducted in two Panchayat regions of Kerala show that Keralite women migrants are increasingly skilled, migrating as nurses to the Gulf countries in good numbers. These women send home higher remittances and the household's economic stability has improved owing to

such remittances (Priyadarshini, 2018). The Southern state of Kerala takes pride in sending the most number of health care workers such as nurses and hospital care givers to the Gulf countries (Percot, 2006).

3. Methodology

This systematic literature review is the first of its kind that focuses on two important facets of women migration: - *Factors and Challenges*. The selection of articles included for systematic review was carried out using the Preferred Reporting System for Systematic Reviews and Meta – Analysis (PRIMA) methodology (Liberati et al., 2009). Studies were identified using key word searches in the electronic databases of Scopus and Web of Science. The key words used were as follows: -

- a. Factors - "Female Migration" or "Women Migration" and "causes" or "reasons" or "factors" or "determinants" or "contributing factors" or "determining factors" or "determinants" or "predictors" or "contributors" or "push" or "pull"
- b. Challenges - "Female Migration" or "Women Migration" and "Gendered problems" or "gender inequality" or "gender politics" or "gender based violence" or "Challenges" or "barriers" or "difficulties" or "issues" or "problems" or "limitations" or "obstacles".

3.1 PRISMA Methodology

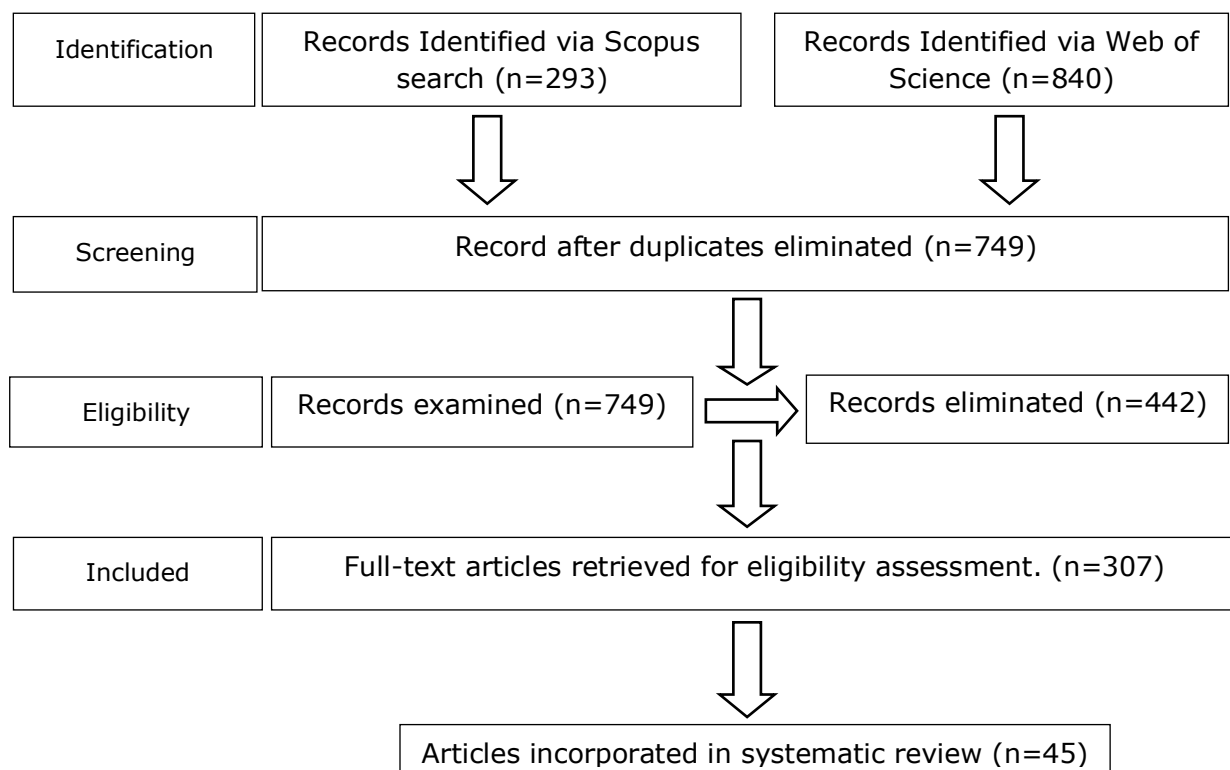


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the PRISMA methodology

4. Summary of Evidence

Full text accessed for eligibility was 307 out of which journal articles were included for review. The articles chosen for review were analyzed under the two broad categories:

4.1 Factors that cause women migration

Rural-urban migration of women is primarily two-fold – dependent or associational migrants (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001; He & Gober, 2003; Hofmann, 2017) or migration in search of employment in manufacturing, service, garment making and informal sector (Biswas et al., 2019). Women with primary education, relatively younger age group of twenties (Benson et al., 2020) and unmarried are some of the factors that promote rural-urban migration of women. Higher levels of education (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013; Abdulloev et al., 2014; Stecklov et al., 2010), gendered needs of employment, occupations that are deemed to be feminine in nature (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013), increasing Labor Force Participation of women in the domestic sectors (Camlin et al., 2014), economic independence (Stecklov et al., 2010; Agadjanian et al., 2014; Gubhaju & De Jong, 2009), presence of social capital in the form of social networks in the host countries (He & Gober, 2003; Stecklov et al., 2010; Agadjanian et al., 2014), high levels of human capital (Hofmann, 2017), and migration as a livelihood strategy (Abramsky et al., 2018) are some of the reasons for women migration

An insight into migration statistics using Gallup World Poll (GWP), national survey of 148 countries during 2009-2013 reveals that migration intentions of women are fueled by lack of respect and dignity in their home land (Ruyssen & Salomone, 2018) or to escape the stigma of being a divorced or a single woman at a certain age in life (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013). Economic and social roles of women in the sending countries, migration policies, border restrictions and resource opportunities in the destination areas are some factors influencing women migration (Cerrutti & Gaudio, 2010). Emotional attachment with family, household characteristics, and social support in origin countries are additional factors that promote women migration (Parrado & Flippen, 2005)

Patriarchal and matrifocal system of gender relations at the source country is a key factor determining female out migration with women outmigration being more pronounced in a matrifocal society than in a patriarchal society (Massey et al., 2006). The destination areas play a critical role in women migration as the socio demographic features of migrant women are heavily influenced by their choice of host country. Some countries attract high skilled and highly educated migrant women whereas others attract low skilled and low educated women migrants (Kofman, 1999). This is true in today's times where we see skilled and qualified women migrating to Europe and

America and the low skilled migrating to the Middle Eastern countries to be engaged in care and domestic service sector.

4.2 Challenges of Women Migration

Migrant women have received less attention in migration literature as compared to skilled migrant men as migrant women are inherently perceived to be low skilled than their male counterparts. *ILO Report on Decent Work Campaign* held in 2008, highlighted the six different dimensions of discrimination that women migrant workers face in terms of the following:

- 'Gender' – Male vs female discrimination
- Race, color and ethnicity- Absence of equal opportunities at work for women belonging to a certain race, color and ethnic background
- Occupation – Engaged in jobs where they are not recognized as labor force
- Wages – The principle of "Equal pay for equal work" is not applied
- Nationality – Foreign vs national workers
- Migration Status – Documented vs undocumented migrants

Wage inequality is one of the biggest challenges that women migrants face globally. Lower hourly wages (Qin et al., 2016; Cao & Wang, 2021), Harsh working conditions (Mahdavi, 2013), absence of medical insurance facilities (Cao & Wang, 2021), discriminatory social practices against migrant women (Ferrant & Tuccio 2015), migrant women trafficking (Basok & Piper, 2012), gendered and ethnic marginalization and oppression (Rydzik et al., 2017; Hwang & Beauregard, 2022), gender inequality (Rydzik et al., 2017). Female migrants are often met with social stigma and criticism for choosing migration over family and children (Tyldum, 2015). Emotional dislocation (Aranda, 2003), racism and stereotyping (Coppola et al., 2007), language barriers and several sacrifices, in the form of health and mental well-being are some of the challenges that women migrants face in their host countries (Tyldum 2015). Despite increasing flows of women migrants, they still continue to face several challenges and obstacles in the form of double discrimination – as women and secondly as migrants in the host countries.

To address the concerns of migrants, the International Organization for Migration, UN agency has launched the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) in 2018 for orderly, safe and regular migration. This Compact has established several regulations to prevent women and girls at all stages of migration and make migration a better experience for them. Migrant women play a vital role in sustaining their families and communities; they send greater remittances than men and often shoulder more responsibilities as care givers and bread winners. Violence and discrimination against

women is a deep rooted social evil that arises due to unequal power relations in the household and society at large.

The following figure is a visual representation of the main factors and challenges that have emerged from the systematic literature review of relevant articles.

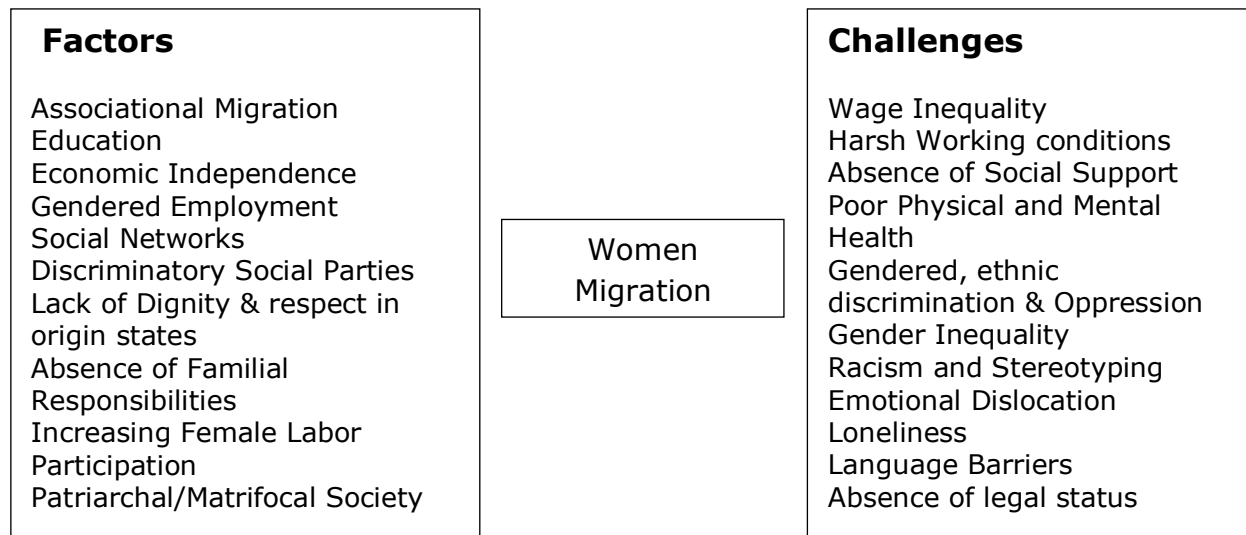


Figure 2. Visual Representation of factors and challenges affecting women migration

5. Discussion

(Grigg, 1977) notes that Female migration as a phenomenon can be traced back to the early 18th century that witnessed the migration of women from United Kingdom and Scotland in search of employment. (Grigg, 1977) also highlights the fact that the countries that record maximum migration of women are the ones that do not offer employment opportunities suited for the women folk. Countries that host women migrants have a strong female labor market, thriving textile and similar industries that can offer them employment. Women are increasingly venturing across borders in pursuit of employment opportunities and improved lives for themselves and their families. Factors driving this trend include economic independence, evolving gender roles in employment, high levels of education and skill, the presence of liberal societies, increased female labor force participation, and experiences as both breadwinners and victims of discrimination in their home countries.

However, women migrants encounter significant challenges throughout their journeys. Breaking free from patriarchal constraints is an initial hurdle, followed by exposure to vulnerabilities in destination areas with limited support for their economic and social well-being (Neetha & Rajan, 2018). Wage inequality, racism, social exclusion, loneliness, mental and physical strain, difficult working conditions, absence of legal status, and dual discrimination as both women and migrant workers contribute to the hardships they face.

With women constituting 50% of the migrant workforce, it is imperative to acknowledge their influence. Gender-specific migration policies are essential to address women's unique concerns. Social welfare programs should extend beyond migration-related issues, encompassing various social dimensions to uphold migrant women's rights and promote gender equality (Neetha & Rajan, 2018). Implementing gender-responsive migration policies will foster safe migration, prevent labor and human rights violations, and enhance the overall well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

6. Women Migration and the Pandemic

Migrant workers faced the greatest challenges of all times with the onset of the pandemic in late 2019 but the consequences of the pandemic have been greater on the women migrants as compared to their male counterparts. Denied or delayed wages, severe harassment and violence, stranded in foreign countries, lack of social support for health care and poor living conditions in overcrowded camps only made them increasingly vulnerable to the spread of infections. The health and economic crisis has led to a disproportionate impact on women employment (Neetha, 2021). Women who were employed in the pre-pandemic era are 23.5% less likely to be employed when the economic activities resume (Neetha, 2021).

The Indian economy went into a lockdown in March 2020, when the onset of pandemic across different states of the country. Sudden clampdown on all economic activities, the migrant workers were left with no option but to return to their home states. The overnight reverse migration sent the economy back 15 years (Nair, 2020). The pervasive global economic downturn is anticipated to result in the feminization of job losses, exacerbating gender disparities to an unprecedented extent (IrudayaRajan et al., 2020). The migration catastrophe in India caught global attention when millions of migrant workers set their return journey on foot, intending to walk several miles before they reach the safety of their homes. The heroic visuals of people on foot send the world into frenzy but the migration reports and the media coverage failed to address the gendered impact of pandemic. The only women that media took notice of was those women that walked back with their husbands and faced several hardships on the way (Venkatraman et al, 2020) starting from giving birth to losing one's life in their quest to safety (Press Trust of India, 2020). Single women that were employed as live in domestic help, working in brick-kiln or construction sites, farm laborers, to those that work in the service industry such as beauticians, sales girls and waitresses (Sharma, 2020). Most migrant women engaged in beauty industry belonging to the North Eastern states had to face harassment and discrimination on the basis of their race and ethnicity and their workplaces that were believed to be hotspots of infection were closed for an indefinite period and the perils that these women took to reach home was never covered in the media (IrudayaRajan et al., 2020).

On the other end, those women who chose to stay back were facing a huge drop in their daily wages as all economic activities came to a halt during the pandemic induced lockdown (Thomas & Jayaram, 2020). In spite of several relief efforts by the Government of India, several women, especially migrant women were kept out of its realm as they were not in possession of essential documents such as Aadhar cards and bank accounts and insufficient identification proofs which prevented a considerable section of women from availing the relief schemes of the government (IrudayaRajan et al., 2020).

7. Way Forward

Globally, the migration patterns of women have undergone a transformation. Traditionally viewed as dependents migrating with their families, women now increasingly migrate independently for economic reasons, often becoming primary breadwinners. In India, policy initiatives for women face challenges due to a lack of an intersectional gender perspective and inclusivity (IrudayaRajan et al., 2020). To address this, migration policies need to bridge the gap between policymakers and grassroots beneficiaries, ensuring effective solutions at the ground level.

The Indian government's current challenge lies in reintegrating numerous reverse migrants—those returning within and beyond the country's borders—starting afresh to rebuild their lives. Without immediate initiatives and policies, the women among these reverse migrants risk becoming marginalized. It is crucial to bring them back into the mainstream economy to ensure a life of dignity and respect. Women workers not only significantly contribute to the economy but also serve as a vital income source for their households. The absence of this income can push households back into poverty traps. Scholars and policymakers alike should prioritize reverse migration, with a special focus on empowering women, as the way forward.

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