

At the Margins and Marginalized Further: The Case of COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in India

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Abstract

COVID-19 has simultaneously ushered in a crisis of public health and of livelihood, where women in general, and migrant women in particular, have been affected disproportionately. Across South Asia, from unequal access to medical treatment to vaccines, the pandemic has pushed women to the margins of an already fragile healthcare system. Migrant workers, as a diverse group (both national and foreign), has borne the brunt of this pandemic and the subsequent collapse of the economic systems and their social security networks. How have women migrant workers fared under these circumstances? On the one hand, they have been pushed out of different development agendas, employed informally in construction, agricultural and service sectors without any of the benefits of so called 'development'. On the other, with the increasing precarization of the informal sector, coupled with unpaid care and work, and the palpable threats of domestic violence, women migrant workers in South Asia continue to experience the worst impact of this pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, South Asia, Migrant women, Migrant workers, Migration and gender

Author Profile

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Introduction

Ananya Chakraborty (2020), in her study of 45 women migrants in/from Bangladesh, Nepal, and India, considers marriage, family reunification, trafficking, and forced labor to be the “most widely attributed causes” for women’s migration in South Asia. Migration for employment, according to her, is also significant, although not always highlighted in studies. Women intending to migrate for employment in South Asia must face social, cultural, and policy barriers that circumscribe their choice of location and migration (Chakraborty 2020, 61). Nevertheless, between 2000 and 2010, the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that migration in South Asia had doubled with an ever-increasing number of women moving independently (“Labor Migration in South Asia”). Protracted conflicts in the region have further uprooted populations in the recent past. Myanmar, although not a formal member of the region but sharing borders with India and Bangladesh, and Afghanistan have experienced sudden regime changes, immersing their people and their neighbors into crisis, further exacerbating job losses, distress migration, and migration for sustenance.

In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) published a report titled “Covid 19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impact and Implications”. In it, the IOM researchers claim that the migrant worker’s choices of employment are determined by (perceived) gendered division of work. This results in women (in domestic and international migration) being employed in sectors that are ‘culturally devalued’, hence receiving lower wages. In sectors that predominantly employ men, women migrant workers perform different duties or are employed in the lower ranks; women’s employment, therefore, is more informal and precarious with threats to their sexual and reproductive health. Each of these inequalities has deepened since the onset of the pandemic (IOM 2020, 2). The current health crisis also highlighted the disproportionate amount of care work (paid and unpaid) carried out by women. Globally, seventy percent of healthcare workers and first responders are women, yet a gender pay gap of twenty-eight percent exists in the health sector (UN Women 2020b). Globally, women also undertake the lion’s share of domestic work (cooking, cleaning, looking after the elderly, children, and the ailing; caring for other persons) within their own households, each of which increased due to the pandemic and the lockdown (Staab, Qayum and Diallo 2020, 1-2), leading to the forecast that 47 million additional women are likely to be impoverished due to COVID-19 (Azcona, Bhatt and Capto 2020). The case of South Asia is no different.

Internal, International, and Intra-regional Migration

People of South Asia have historically traveled across the region to escape persecution, for marriage, for trade, expansion of empires, to flee conflict, and now, increasingly, for employment. With the drawing of national boundaries post-independence, existing population flows have in many ways been hindered; erstwhile communities are now divided by

international borders. Within South Asia, the Maldives receives the highest number of migrant workers (Human Rights Watch 2020), amounting to a quarter of the country's population (United Nations Maldives 2020, 7). Bangladeshi workers constitute the maximum number of migrant laborers in the Maldives, and they also form a large share of migrant laborers in India. Nepali laborers work in India, while many migrant workers from Afghanistan find employment in Pakistan. India also serves as the transit country for many migrant workers, especially from Nepal.

There are massive movements of people inside respective national boundaries in South Asian countries; for instance, the case of Shimu who moved from a village in Bangladesh to Dhaka, the nation's capital. The perturbing exodus of migrant workers from many major Indian cities after the abrupt imposition of national lockdown on 24 March 2020, brought to national and international attention the enormity and plight of migrant workers. Repeatedly, researchers have bemoaned the lack of data related to domestic migrants. The union government had informed the Parliament that it has no data relating to the number of such workers who walked back to their villages (Haq and Bharadwaj 2021), or job losses or even deaths among those who trekked back (Saha 2020). In 2021, in Bangladesh, garment workers rushed back to their factories which reopened amidst the lockdown: "Hundreds of thousands who had gone back to their villages to celebrate the *Eid al Adha* Muslim festival and sit out the lockdown, headed to Dhaka in any available transport – some just walking in the monsoon rain" (*The Economic Times* 2021).

Human Rights Watch (2020) highlighted the precarious condition of the migrant workers in the Maldives, forced to live in extremely cramped quarters, often abandoned, unpaid, or fired due to their participation in agitations during the pandemic. In poignant video footage, thousands of Afghans were seen running back to Afghanistan when the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was reopened, after more than two weeks of restrictions (*The Telegraph* 2020). In different parts of India, thousands of Nepalese migrant workers were stranded, even one month into the lockdown in 2020 (Paudel 2020).

Migrant workers from South Asia in other countries fared similarly during the pandemic; many were stranded due to the closure of borders, shutting down of their places of employment, and lack of money to pay rent or to purchase food. For migrant workers who had left their hometowns for work either within their country or abroad, in both instances the workers equally felt an overwhelming sense of abandonment by local, regional, national, and international authorities. Within international and domestic migrant workers, those who were paid low and/or informally employed were particularly treated akin to stateless people, "without losing the state's legal recognition" (Remesh et al. 2020, 76).

Women Migrant Workers in the Informal Sector: Multiple Marginalities

A 2018 ILO report revealed that more than 68.2 percent of workers in the Asia-Pacific region make their living in the informal economy (ILO Press Release 2018). In South Asia, the situation is even starker; 90 percent of the workers in India and 85 percent in Bangladesh are

informally employed. Different countries in South Asia implemented swift and strict national lockdowns in 2020, with more regional versions reintroduced in 2021, all leading to job losses, loss of income, displacement for not being able to pay rent, hunger, and pauperization among informal workers. They also had to shoulder a disproportionate health burden (historically health infrastructure has been abysmally inadequate in South Asia with investment in public health being 0.9 percent of the GDP in the region), in addition to a lack of legal recognition and protection (Shaikh 2020).

The UN Women's "Progress of the World's Women" 2015-2016 report claims that "from street vendors and domestic workers to subsistence farmers and seasonal agriculture workers, women make up a disproportionate percentage of workers in the informal sector. In South Asia, over 80 percent of women in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment..." This reveals a dreadful reality of the status of employment of women in South Asia (UN Women 2021). Women who migrate, either with families, in large groups, or by themselves, face multiple marginalizations. They are at the receiving end of the dual burden of precarity induced by informality and traditionality associated with their gender positions. Moreover, they are further marginalized for being migrants *vis-a-vis* locals, first-time job seekers *vis-a-vis* experienced workers, and foreigners *vis-a-vis* natives (ADB and ILO 2011, 17). Women migrant workers in and from South Asia are employed in healthcare, agriculture, hospitality, domestic work, care work in domestic and institutional settings, sanitation, construction, beauty industry, factories (from garment to other manufacturing), and many more diverse fields (ADB and ILO 2011, 10). Many, especially in India and Bangladesh are also street vendors, vendors on railways, and waste pickers (Bagchi 2016, 63). Almost all sex workers across the region are migrants who are domestic or from the region. Each of these sectors is marked by low and infrequent wages, gender pay gaps, stereotyping of women into certain kinds of work (domestic work, care work), lack of safe and clean sanitation at the workplace, increased risk of occupational diseases, the threat and reality of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, near absence of maternity benefits, absence of health coverage and almost always, an unequal burden of care work within their own households (Torosyan et al. 2016, 3-4). Mostly, they fall outside the purview of labor laws, labor inspection, and social protection. They receive lower wages and still send a larger proportion of their wages back home. In the case of domestic work, since feminization of domestic work is absolute and historical, it becomes very difficult for women to gain the status of an employee especially since domestic work is carried out in private and behind closed doors leaving women more vulnerable to discrimination and human rights abuse. Migrant women, hardly ever reach the position of an employer, and since the relationship between the employer and the employee is one of power, they continue to exist and work at the other end of the power axis.

Each of the marginalities experienced by women migrant workers are a result of entrenched and structural patriarchy, as well as its collusion with neoliberal modes of employment and governance that are now a determining feature of South Asian societies. Even before the pandemic, its induced lockdowns, the resulting job losses, and the shrinking economy, the plight of women migrant workers in the informal sector was precarious. The pandemic has

made the divisions in society sharper, entrenched further, and perhaps more difficult to recover from.

India: Individual Instances, Universal Maladies

India and the world witnessed the long trek back by domestic migrant workers from different parts of the country, all through the summer of 2020 after the lockdown was announced on March 24.

Indrani Mazumdar and Neetha N (2020) link women's increasing participation in rural to urban migration with the negative impact of neoliberalism's growth paradigm, agrarian distress, and a highly gendered employment crisis. They note that women's Work Participation Rate (WPR) showed a "dramatic" fall from 24.8 percent (2011-12) to 17.8 percent (2017-18) in rural India. Just prior, women began migrating to urban areas for employment or business, increasing from 4.1 million (2001) to 8.5 million (2011). However, the Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act of 1978 (ISMWA) only addresses contract-based labor migration across state boundaries, keeping outside of its ambit people who have moved within the same state, or those forcibly displaced due to vulnerability, or women migrant workers who have moved with families or groups not based on any contract they have entered into, but on their own. "A Study on Social Security and Health Rights of Migrant workers in India" which undertook a sample survey in the four Indian states of Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, and Maharashtra, found that women migrant workers, children, and migrant mothers face exceptional hurdles in accessing healthcare. They often exist outside the ambit of the Integrated Child Development Scheme implemented by respective state governments and do not get health or nutritional supplements that pregnant and lactating women are entitled to and are not given breastfeeding breaks at their workplaces (John et al. 2020, 35). Migrant women in the informal sectors typically reside in slums and irregular settlements with little or no access to safe sanitation. This, combined with the societal stigma around women's menstruation and hygiene, adversely affects their sanitary health.

Therefore, when the huge number of woman migrant workers trekking back during the lockdown-triggered exodus appeared in the media in 2020, it was hardly surprising. But it caught people's attention only through extraordinary events, as extraordinary and painful as death. Twelve-year-old Jamlo Madkam died 60 km from her home in Chhattisgarh, walking back from the chili fields of Telangana. Avreena Khatun traveling on a Shramik (trans. labor) train died with her infant trying to wake her up, the footage of which was captured on camera and streamed across television networks. Virottama Surendranath Shukla, 58, died in the queue waiting to register for the train back home (Thapiyal 2020 and Banerjee 2021). The images of Jamlo Madkam, an Adivasi kid who should have been in school, Avreena Khatun, a young mother, and Virottama Shukla, a dominant caste woman, bring to the fore existing and entrenched inequalities that target the most vulnerable of India's women. They highlight the unequal access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health. "From Insight to Action: Gender Inequality in the Wake of COVID-19" reiterates the same observation where marginalized women (as has been mentioned above) lack access to safe and clean sanitation,

or knowledge about sexual and reproductive health (UN Women 2000a). During the lockdown in India, Primary Health Care centers in villages were doubled up as safe homes and quarantine centers essentially denying returnee women migrants a place to turn to for their sexual and reproductive health. The channeling of ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers and Anganwadi (state sponsored rural child care centres) workers for contact tracing and raising awareness about COVID-19 prevented them from carrying out their usual duties of providing assistance and counseling on reproductive issues to women residents of the villages. The burden of family planning, which usually falls on women created an additional burden for Bihari women migrants since the lockdown escalated their unmet need for contraceptives, as outlined in the study by Anamika Priyadarshini and Sonmani Chaudhury (2020, 74). The study also noted rising instances of domestic violence.

A UNDP study, “Socio Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Women Migrant Workers”, surveyed existing determinants of inequality and discrimination among a sample of more than 10,000 women migrant workers from 12 Indian states, of which more than three-quarters of the respondents belonged to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. Of the total number of respondents, 40 percent had been laid off between February and December 2020 (Guha Khas-Nobis and Chandna, 4). The Study also noted that the pandemic led to lowering of wages across the board and increasing debt (5-6). Migrant women were often left out of social security schemes; three out of ten women interviewed did not own a ration card and could not access food items available through the Public Distribution System (7). Similarly, three out of ten respondents were not covered by any government insurance scheme, and a similar number did not know whether they were covered (8).

Rest of South Asia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward

Sri Lanka

The post-colonial island nation differs significantly from India with respect to migrant workers. Cities in Sri Lanka are “less densely populated with virtually no concentration of rural migrant worker families temporarily residing in cities” (Jayathilake et al. 2021, 19). But, with several lockdowns, the informal workers in the country were severely affected, while international migrant workers faced loss of jobs and were stuck in their places of employment due to border closure. Of these workers, a vast section were women. In 2019, about 40 percent of the total workers migrating to take up foreign employment were women (Weeraratne 2021, 2). Since Sri Lanka’s repatriation policy privileged security forces and students, migrant workers, especially pregnant women in the Gulf countries (without healthcare access) needed state intervention (Jayathilake et al. 2021, 80). Even as late as November 2020, migrant workers from Sri Lanka were pleading to the government for repatriation (UCA News Reporter 2020); a majority of them were women employed as domestic workers and nurses in different health care services. About 41 women, some of them accompanied by children, were detained in Riyadh for up to 18 months during the pandemic. The last group to be repatriated to Sri Lanka arrived only on 19 May 2021, more than a year after the outbreak of COVID-19. Amnesty International reported that this may have been due to the expiration of their employment contract, and “their employer’s failure to obtain an exit permit or because they fled from an

abusive employer” (Amnesty International 2021). This points to both the violation of the workers’ human rights and the refusal of governments to take responsibility for their citizens. In several meetings of SANDD (South Asian Network for Displacement and Development), civil society activists from Sri Lanka reported that after the return of the migrant workers, a crucial challenge was to find them suitable work at home. Migrating for work and being financially independent, sending remittances home, and often living in nuclear family setups, or with other women had undoubtedly contributed to the empowerment of these women. Returning to Sri Lanka, with little or no prospect of similar jobs, these women are experiencing a setback in their achievements. Since the introduction of the Family Background Report (FBR) regulation in 2013, which banned women workers with children younger than five from migrating for work, women’s official migration fell significantly between 2013-17, while simultaneously increasing concerns over human trafficking and other unsafe channels of migration (ILO 2018, 2). It has been argued that the FBR was introduced in response to “reports of neglect and abuse of children”, while researchers justifiably claim that the rationale behind FBR in Sri Lanka was linked to the patriarchal cultural understanding of unpaid childcare being the primary responsibility of women (Weeraratne 2021, 1). The plight of the returning women migrants has to be understood within this context.

Bangladesh

A feature film, *Made in Bangladesh* flags some of the recurring concerns facing women in the informal sector: harassment, loss of pay, lack of medical facilities, absence of protective policies, and the collusion between factory owners, multinational capital, and political classes that enable employers to act with complete impunity. A 2020 study, reports the male to female composition of readymade garment workers as 40:60 (ACD 2021, 10), thereby enabling many women workers to reach decision-making positions in their families (21). In 2021, scenes like those in India in 2020 were witnessed in Dhaka, where a large number of migrant workers started leaving the city after the lockdown was imposed. Bangladesh, along with India, has witnessed a rise in child marriages since the beginning of the pandemic, a community response to prolonged school closure and impoverishment. Marriages also precipitate migration, and some studies have linked the return of migrant workers from abroad due to the lockdown to the rise in child marriages (Sakib 2021). Unlike domestic migrants, Bangladeshi migrant workers working abroad are predominantly male; women constituted a mere 15 percent of international migrants in 2019 (Chowdhury and Chakraborty 2021, 45). Although there is reason to believe that many Bangladeshi women working in the Middle East countries continue to be undocumented, it can perhaps be concluded that women migrant workers inside Bangladesh by and large have borne the burden of the pandemic. The International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry, which many international clothing retailers have signed with garment workers and factory owners in Bangladesh, is expected to bring about certain improvements in general health and safety measures for the workers (Falor 2021). While the employment provisions and state of precarity continue to be the same for informal workers across the world even after the epochal event of the pandemic, we can only hope that the women migrant workers of Bangladesh, overrepresented in the garment industry, will have a healthier workplace to look forward to in the new decade.

Nepal

Women in and from Nepal work primarily in the informal sector. For them, India remains the main destination country with UAE, Qatar, Jordan, and Malaysia following close behind. India is also a transit country for many workers, which makes data regarding women migrating through irregular channels difficult to come by (The Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Team 2021, 1). Like Sri Lankan women migrant workers, many from Nepal were stranded in various foreign countries facing job loss with the closure of borders and often lacking resources to return to Nepal. Recruitment agencies estimated that as many as 500,000 Nepalese workers were likely to return due to COVID-19-induced job losses (Rimal 2021). A quick telephone survey by the IOM with 3000 migrant workers revealed that almost all migrant workers' jobs had been affected by COVID 19 (IOM 2021, 11). However, a gender-specific pattern was discernable; their job status being similar, pandemic-induced layoffs were more common among women migrant workers (11), with 41 percent of women not receiving their salaries as opposed to 29 percent of men (14). A higher number of men expressed their desire to return to Nepal, compared to women. This might lead us to conclude that women found greater mobility and comfort in their places of work, but researchers highlight that the reality was different and stark. Since the Nepal government required documentation for repatriation many women who had migrated through indirect channels and routes were unable to provide it (19). The Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Team (2021) also report that unmarried, pregnant, and single migrant women face stigma upon return and called for reintegration measures with an intersectional approach to cater to every single migrant woman from different sections of society (1-2). The Supreme Court took cognizance of the vulnerability of women migrant workers and directed the government to maintain gender desegregated data of returnee and repatriated migrant workers, prioritizing their repatriation and reintegration (3).

Bhutan

Bhutan registered the least number of COVID-19 infections in South Asia, and it also managed the pandemic without any national lockdown. But the suspension of tourism worldwide hit Bhutan hard with many employees in tourism sector laid off and people making their living through small business ventures being disproportionately affected. With 87.52 percent of total employment in Bhutan in the informal sector, an overwhelming majority of workers in Bhutan were impacted by the pandemic. During the pandemic, to alleviate the condition of people who faced job losses and poverty, the government set up the Druk Gyalpo Relief Kidu, which provided monetary transfers to 23,000 people. Returning Bhutanese fell within the ambit of this program. But this protection scheme was not universal in nature (Alvarenga and Soares 2020). Bhutan's economy is primarily agrarian in nature and informal labor is widespread in areas where people are poor and have little education (World Bank 2016). In each of these instances, women were more in number as most employed Bhutanese women were part of the informal sector before the pandemic. Of the informal workers, street food and vegetable vendors, temporary workers in export sectors were the worst hit along with home-based weavers and bakers (Wangmo 2020), each of which would have had sizable concentration of women workers.

Pakistan

“Pakistan is among the most significant emigration countries worldwide”, most of whom are young, educated men (Hahn-Schaur 2021, 3). In 2019, just about 4079 women emigrated, reflecting the low labor market participation of women in Pakistan in general (20). With COVID-19-triggered lockdown, there has been a disproportionate impact on women workers, who were predominantly home-based or domestic workers, and invisible within the system (Hasan et al. 2021, 5). The ILO’s Rapid Assessment Survey on COVID 19 and migrant workers in Pakistan found that they were predominantly male and 96 percent of whom had immigrated to the Gulf countries. In 2019, only 0.65 percent of the migrant workers registered abroad were women (2021, 17). Pakistan is also home to a large number of domestic migrant workers who work in menial jobs under difficult conditions.

Maldives

During the pandemic, Maldives was in news for mistreating migrant workers. In 1985, there were 2422 migrant workers in the Maldives and by 2020, it had reached a staggering 180,000 of which nearly 63,000 were undocumented (Mohamed 2020, 1). There are instances of fraudulent recruiters who brought workers from outside the country (2) where they have been facing ‘compound[ing] perennial abuse[s]’, forced to live in shared accommodation in shifts, with limited access to health, sanitation, and water (Human Rights Watch 2020). Just like in Bangladesh, the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of the migrant workers must be shared by the employers who benefit from the labor of these workers in their tourist resorts.

Afghanistan

In August 2021, Afghanistan went through a rapid and violent transfer of power, following the retreat of the American military, the Taliban were back in power. This triggered massive internal displacement and scramble for refuge and asylum by fleeing citizens, and exacerbated the existing precarious condition of many vulnerable groups in the country, particularly women, children, and migrant workers.

A 2013 report by ILO notes the attempts by the then Afghanistan government to enter into agreements with neighboring Iran and Pakistan “to enable Afghans to seek work in the region and to send remittances home” (Wickramasekara and Barua 2013, 1). Labor migration—both in the region and internationally, within the country, circular and irregular migration was and continues to be necessary for the generation of employment and remuneration, while data related to labor migration is difficult to come by (2). Aziz A. Hakimi (2021) considers migration from Afghanistan to be driven primarily by masculinist ideals, in which young unmarried Afghan men move in order “to be the breadwinner, to provide for their families, and to achieve the social status and prestige that comes with marriage.” Apart from working as seasonal and agricultural workers, Afghan women’s empowerment and poverty reduction are closely linked with their migration for work. But under the present Taliban regime, women have been banned from all kinds of work except that which cannot be performed by a man, for example, that of an attendant in a women’s toilet (Barr 2021). This has resulted in widespread loss of income, famine-like situation, and a rise in malnutrition. With the withdrawal of foreign aid and the inability of the current government to access foreign reserves, the condition of the

ordinary Afghan has become exceptionally precarious. Against this background, there is a clear and present danger that women keen on migrating in search of work are more likely to get trafficked and sold into bondage, a commonplace occurrence in conflict zones the world over.

Conclusion: The Women Who did not Go Back

Aarefa Johari's article "The migrant workers who never went back" contains the interviews of several single women who migrated to work in garment factories in India's Tirupur, more than 2000 km away from their native state, Jharkhand, after they received training in tailoring. In each case, the women had fought with their families, and taken the important decision to achieve their financial independence; their decision to migrate was a step towards what they considered to be empowerment. But the pandemic-induced lockdown across India in March 2020 left them in near-prison-like situations with the factory owners keeping them confined to their hostels, without adequate food, and in a place with unfamiliar language and people. Several of them were rescued by activists and government officials. After getting back to their native place, most of them have decided to stay. They are scared to relive the lockdown experience again. They now help their families in their small agricultural holdings or do odd jobs with meager salaries and no career prospects. Johari (2021) writes, "what women like Simran and Anita were doing was novel, almost revolutionary. They were showing that with the right opportunities, Indian women had the will to migrate great distances for work, and contribute towards building a manufacturing-based economy." But the pandemic and the lockdown took away these opportunities, abruptly.

Across South Asia, the same story has been repeating itself multiple times. In Bangladesh, women continue to be exploited more in the garment industry and more women were laid off than men in the first phase of the lockdown when they returned to their respective villages. Although the government announced relief packages for the garment industry, its benefits did not trickle down to the women workers (Rakshit 2020). In Sri Lanka, women struggling with microfinance debts protested against the government, several committed suicide, citing inability to repay their debts. Meera Srinivasan (2021) narrates the plight of Irangani who got into a debt trap after she returned from West Africa where she worked as domestic help, a few years ago. While Irangani was not a returnee migrant following the pandemic, her situation reflects entrenched inequalities in the society that increased the gendered poverty gap during and as a result of the pandemic. The UNDP and UN-Women report predicts that by 2030, there will be 129 poor women per 100 men living in extreme poverty in South Asia (Azcona et al. 2020). The gender analysis on COVID-19 in Nepal found that the number of women not engaged in paid work increased by 337 percent in Nepal (Nepal Research Institute 2020, vii) while UN Women stressed that women's access to sexual and reproductive health deteriorated abysmally during the pandemic (2020a, 3). The pandemic intensified women's unpaid care and domestic work (9), and increased domestic and other forms of violence against women (10). It widened gender gaps and exacerbated existing inequalities along caste, religion, and community lines; while women were disproportionately over-exposed as frontline workers, their needs were regularly overlooked by policymakers (Gurol and Luchsinger 2021).

The factors that trigger women to migrate be it displacement, conflict, poverty, family, or in search of livelihood is a reflection of the society they live in with all its benefits and pitfalls. In the neoliberal system of governance and economic restructuring worldwide, labor is increasingly precaritized, informal, and unregulated. South Asia is no exception. Within a patriarchal system, women's work is both devalued and underpaid resulting in further disenfranchisement of women in the spheres of economic production. COVID-19 has exacerbated all existing faultlines in society, and women migrant workers, as a result, are finding themselves at the short end of the stick in South Asia. The UN Women forwarded a series of recommendations aimed at alleviating the plight of vulnerable women during the pandemic. They range from introducing economic packages for vulnerable women to introducing new or amended social protection programs that reach all women and girls (UN Women 2020a, 14). But thus far, COVID-19 recovery schemes across South Asia have not placed women at the center of their recovery strategies. In this context, women migrant workers are likely to suffer further from increasing job losses, impoverishment, and hunger – something they have endured over the past year and half.

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