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Women at Work, But Not on the Move: What do the Data Say?

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Surveys say the numbers of migrant working women are small but that is because of how they are designed. More women are actually entering labour markets beyond their home regions. Yet public discourse views migration through a male-centric lens, overlooking women's economic roles and aspirations.

For decades, India's migration story has followed a familiar outline: a young man in his twenties or thirties from Bihar, Odisha, or Uttar Pradesh boarding a train to a distant city in search of work. Labour migration in India has long been a male story. Women, on the other hand, are seen as dependents, moving for marriage or accompanying families.

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The Census of India classifies people as migrants if they are enumerated at a place different from either their place of birth or their last usual residence; with the latter being the more analytically relevant measure of mobility. Census 2011 recorded about 309 million female migrants and 145 million male migrants, a distribution that translates to roughly 68% women and 32% men. Although these numbers appear to suggest that migration in India is overwhelmingly feminine, this numerical dominance masks the reality that women's mobility is shaped far more by social norms than by economic choice.

Recent data continues to highlight the same trend. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21 shows that 47.9% of women were classified as migrants, compared with only 14.2% of men-a divergence explained almost entirely by marriage-driven movement, since nearly 86% of migrant women cited marriage as their main reason for relocating.

Employment-driven migration remains extremely limited for women. In the National Sample Survey 2007-08, only 1.2% of migrant women aged between 15 and 59 reported moving for work, whereas the figure for migrant men in the same age group was 53.9%. More than a decade later, by 2020-21, the share of migrant women moving for employment had risen only to 1.8%, while employment-related migration among migrant men had increased to 55.3%.

During this period, women's participation in the labour market had undergone significant shifts. PLFS estimates show that the female labour force participation rate increased from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24. However, as Gupta and Chowdhury (2025) argue, this increase is driven not by growth in paid or formal work but by the expansion of women counted as helpers in household enterprises or as self-employed workers. Wage employment has not kept pace, and real earnings for most categories of women workers have declined.

Despite these structural constraints, women's mobility for work is slowly increasing across rural and urban India. More women are stepping outside traditional roles, seeking economic autonomy, and entering labour markets beyond their home regions. Despite this, policy and public discourse continue to view migration through a male-centric lens, overlooking women's economic roles and aspirations.

This persistent framing has made women's labour mobility largely invisible within migration statistics and development debates. The inability to capture the extent and dynamics of female labour migration, as Mazumdar et al. (2013) observe, lies at the heart of the broader neglect of gender in India's migration and development frameworks.

This points to a critical gap: the continued under-representation of women in labour migration flows in India.

Invisible Workforce

The invisibility of women within migration data partly explains this gap. National-level data typically ask respondents for a single primary reason for migration, oversimplifying women's complex migration experiences and often masking their economic roles. These datasets lack any mechanism to capture secondary reasons for migration. As a result, many women who move for marriage or family reasons eventually participate in economic activities at their destinations, yet remain statistically invisible. According to the PLFS 2020-

21, among women who migrated primarily for marriage, 33.9% are employed post-migration.

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In addition, 14.3% of these marriage migrants were already working before they relocated. Also, as women's paid work is often informal or home-based, or intertwined with unpaid family work-for instance, agricultural work, domestic chores or care work-national surveys often fail to record or correctly classify these activities, or respondents do not identify such activities as "employment" in migration modules.

Among female migrants who migrated for employment, 68.4% are currently employed, 10.7% self-employed, and 4.9% engaged in unpaid family work. Nearly 29.1% of female migrant workers are engaged in domestic duties, free collection of goods, and tailoring for household use, while an estimated 86% remain in jobs without written contracts and access to social benefits.

Mazumdar and Neetha (2011) show that many female migrants are employed in an extension of household labour such as cleaning, cooking, or care work, reproducing traditional gender roles even in urban labour markets. The overlap between paid and unpaid work underscores how blurred the boundaries of women's labour remain. Even when migration is motivated by economic need, the work women perform is often undervalued and undercounted. Beyond data gaps, an intricate web of social norms, safety concerns, household responsibilities, and informal work structures continues to limit women's spatial mobility, keeping their economic participation confined to the local level.

The PLFS shows that, demographically, most of the migrant women are in their mid-thirties, with the majority (72.2%) currently married. Educational backwardness is another defining feature, with 40.2% having never been to school, and 19.3% having studied only up to the primary level. Such low educational attainment often restricts women's access to formal and better paid jobs, keeping them concentrated in low paid and gendered occupations such as domestic work, cleaning, or care giving, roles that mirror household responsibilities.

Moreover, as Chandrasekhar and Sharma (2014) note, urban labour markets remain largely unprepared for women's independent migration, offering limited support for childcare, safe transport, or affordable housing. These interlocking barriers, rooted in entrenched gender norms and in the persistence of informality, restrict women's livelihoods to highly localised spaces. They also render women's mobility and work across India largely invisible.

Regional Variations

While national statistics continue to persistently show low female migration for work, a closer look at state-level figures reveals a more nuanced picture. Beneath these small national figures lies a landscape of striking regional contrasts. India exhibits a sharp and persistent North-South divide in female labour migration, one that mirrors broader differences in gender norms, labour markets, and household structures across regions. The PLFS 2020-21 data indicate that northern states still record very low levels of work-related migration among women, where movement continues to be overwhelmingly driven by marriage. Deep-rooted cultural expectations and patriarchal constraints continue to restrict women's economic mobility in this region.

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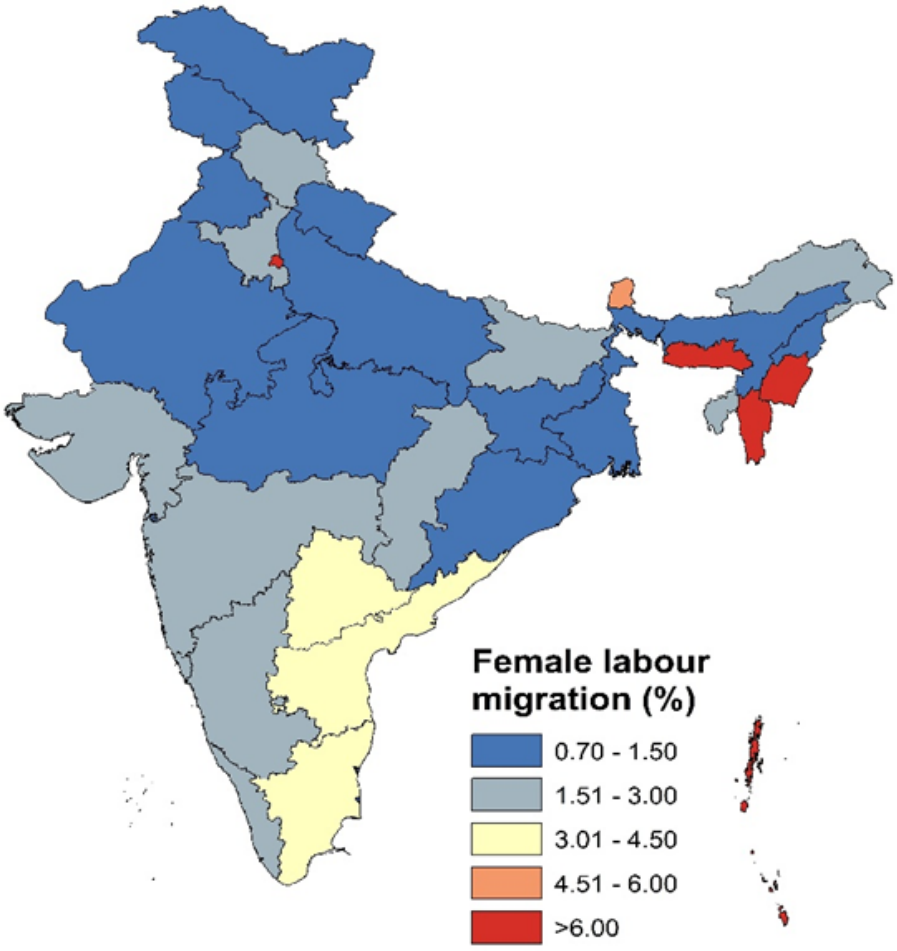
The contrast is stark in the southern belt, where states like Andhra Pradesh (3.3%), Tamil Nadu (3.5%), Telangana (3.4%), and Kerala (2.7%) show a gradual but steady rise in women's migration for work. These movements are closely linked to expanding opportunities in the service sector, especially in nursing, hospitality, textiles, and care giving. The region's relatively progressive gender norms, higher female education, and diversified economies have collectively enabled greater mobility.

Female labour migration remains low in the eastern region as well, though Bihar has shown a slight rise since the National Sample Survey from July 2007 to June 2008. This uptick appears to be driven by rising economic distress and limited local job opportunities, which often compel women to migrate frequently for work, often accompanying men to distant urban centres.

Interestingly, the Northeastern states stand out as a notable exception to the national trend. Collectively, the region records 7.6% of female migration for work, a rare pattern in India's migration landscape. The trend is particularly pronounced in Mizoram (7.7%), Meghalaya (6.4%), and Sikkim (5.3%), and is exceptionally high in Manipur (33.1%). This divergence reflects more egalitarian gender norms, higher female literacy, and a lack of employment opportunities, compounded by periodic political unrest that has often compelled women from these states to migrate outside the region.

Western India shows moderate levels of women migrating for employment, while major urban hubs such as Delhi (8%) stand out with comparatively high rates of female migration. Although Delhi has historically been a major destination for migrants, PLFS data (2020-21, 2022-23) shows that women's labour force participation in the city is among the lowest in India. The pandemic and the collapse of unorganised sector jobs deepened this decline. With most women confined to low paid, insecure informal work (Mani 2023), and persistent safety concerns limiting mobility (Singh et al. 2023), many women are now leaving Delhi in search of better employment elsewhere.

Figure 1: State-level Female Migration for Employment



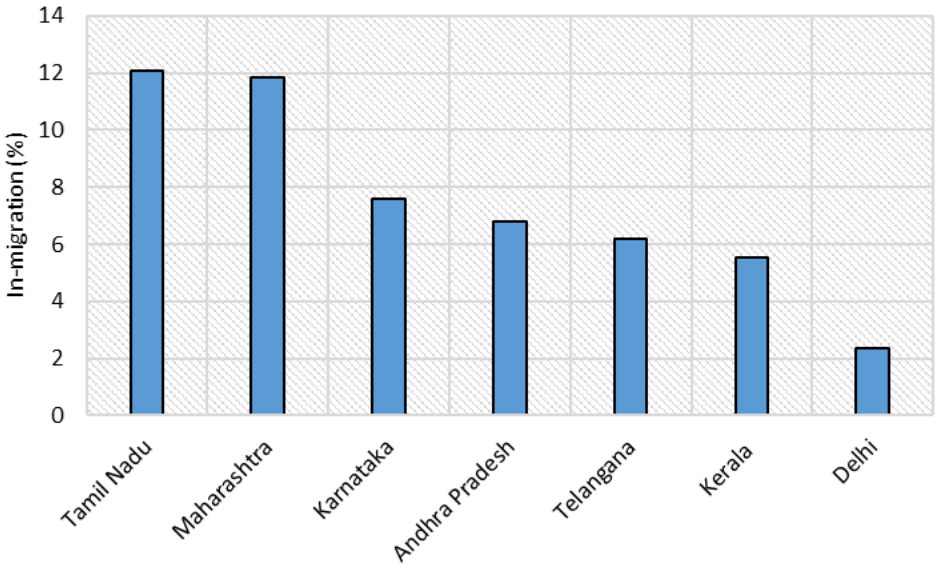
Among the major destination states, Tamil Nadu (12.1%), Maharashtra (11.8%), Karnataka (7.6%), Andhra Pradesh (6.8%), and Telangana (6.2%) account for the highest share of female in-migration for work. Southern urban centres such as Bengaluru and Chennai have emerged as key hubs for this emerging wave of female migrants, who are increasingly engaged in garment and textile factories, hospitality sectors, and also in domestic work and care giving.

Declining rural incomes, mounting agricultural distress, and shrinking job opportunities in the countryside have pushed many women to seek livelihoods beyond their home districts and states.

Kerala, with 5.5%, is also a notable destination, especially districts such as Ernakulam and Kottayam, where women are employed in service sector jobs, plywood factories, tailoring, and brick-making. Delhi, at 2.4%, continues to be a key urban destination as well. Although most women migrate within their home states, the southern states continue to draw significant numbers of women from the Northeast, West Bengal, and Odisha.

The data further reveals higher mobility among urban women, who make up about 68.7% of all female labour migrants. Declining rural incomes, mounting agricultural distress, and shrinking job opportunities in the countryside have pushed many women to seek livelihoods beyond their home districts and states. The movement is not always visible in official counts, as much of it occurs through informal and short-term migration channels, but it marks an important shift in India's rural labour landscape.

Figure 2: Top Destination States Having High Share of Female Labour Migrants



Dearth of Data

One of the pressing challenges in understanding migration in India is the lack of reliable and timely data. After the National Sample Survey 2007-08 and the Census 2011, it took more than a decade for the country to release another comprehensive set of figures through the PLFS 2020-21. The next Census, expected only in 2026-27, means this data vacuum will persist for another year.

> India needs migration data that is more dynamic, frequent, and responsive to changing patterns of mobility.

Even the Census has its own shortcomings in capturing work-related migration, particularly for women. While it captures details on work participation, it does not integrate this with migration information, making it difficult to determine whether migrants are currently employed and the nature of their work.

Economists have long cautioned that migration data in India are fragmented and incomplete. National surveys often fail to capture seasonal, circular, and short-term mobility, and tend to focus mainly on registered or long-term migrants, overlooking vast streams of rural-to-rural and informal movements. This leads to a serious undercounting of India's mobile workforce.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the PLFS migration estimates were gathered during the Covid-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and reverse migration significantly disrupted mobility patterns. As a result, even this latest dataset offers a distorted snapshot of a deeply complex and dynamic phenomenon. Within this, female labour migration remains even more underrepresented due to its informal and often invisible nature.

Way Forward

To address this, future surveys could include a secondary reason column in the migration schedule to reflect the intertwined and multiple motives behind women's mobility decisions, thereby reducing misclassification. Capturing whether an individual was employed

before migration, their current employment status, and the nature of their work would help track the economic trajectories associated with migration, such as sectoral shifts, changes in earnings, and changes in work status.

In addition, obtaining more comprehensive and nuanced information on women's paid and unpaid work could reduce underreporting of women's work participation. Also, relying on decadal data is inadequate for a country experiencing rapid labour transitions. India needs migration data that is more dynamic, frequent, and responsive to changing patterns of mobility.

Addressing low levels of female labour migration is not merely a statistical task. It requires a gender-sensitive migration framework that expands women's access to skill training, safe housing, affordable child care, and secure transport, and helps build a more equitable and inclusive labour market.

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