

# Rights and Vulnerabilities

A Research Study of  
Migrant Women Workers  
in the Informal Sector in Delhi



JAGORI  
New Delhi, 2004

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study documents migrant women's experiences of living in the city and working in the informal sector. Carried out over one year in slum settlements in Delhi, the objective was to understand, through women's eyes, the processes of migration to the city, finding work, setting up a home and building a new life.

We have interviewed women working in different sites of work including factory workers, domestic workers, self-employed women, home-based workers and construction workers. The largest number of migrants in our sample were from West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The sample also included some from Bangladesh though they did not always report themselves as such. All the women in the sample were first generation migrants and mostly in the age group of 25-60. In terms of demographic characteristics we found very poor indicators. A majority of them were illiterate or barely literate but with no formal schooling. They were all employed within the informal sector with a monthly household income of Rs. 3000 or less.

Their stories of migration were similar. They left the village because of lack of any livelihood options. They came to the city through known networks – some family member or someone else from the village or community already working in the city. They are thus introduced to life and travails in the city. In some cases the women came to the city after their men had already established their lives there. All of them continue to keep some sort of links with the village- through visits, letters, telephones, news through new migrants and others who return to visit.

The migrants rarely dwell on memories of the journey. For them it is the past. The few who did speak got very emotional. "*Aisa laga ki sab chod aye*" (it felt as if we left everything behind.) Many recognise the advantages of being in the city and state that they would probably never be able to live in the village again. "*What will we do in the village. Our children will be so bored.*" They also

recognise that there are very few opportunities for earning a livelihood in the village, and accept that the city will be their home forever.

It was through informal networks that many of them found a place to live and found work. Many have also taken loans, either from fellow workers or residents of the slum and some from money-lenders, especially when arriving in the city to help find a roof over their heads and basic amenities.

Migration literature has demonstrated that women who migrate independently do so for economic reasons, but women who migrate with men are often defined as 'associational migrants'. In this study too, we found that many women migrated with their husbands. However this does not necessarily make them associational migrants, because their labour power and earning capacity is an important factor in the decision to move, and thereafter when they arrive in the city. They are as much economic migrants as the men.

Women often find life in the city, despite all the hardships, liberating from very strong traditional community structures and expectations. Since they are earning members, their position becomes stronger vis-à-vis the husband, family and community. In more than half the cases, either the men were not earning or the women were single and thus had the burden of financially supporting the family. In the village, though they would work in the fields, their work was just an extension of their domestic responsibilities and was not seen as work in the sense that waged work is. In the words of one of the women, "*gaon ki azadi alag hai aur shaher ki azadi alag hai*" (the village has one kind of freedom, the city, another).

This study documents the fact that women and men are migrating in search of livelihood, that women are important economic agents in this process, and it is their labour in various segments of the unorganised sector that contributes to the growth of the city and national income, all of which often go unrecognised and unsung.



# **I** N AN ERA OF GLOBALISATION: **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

## **Women and Migration**

Migration is not a new phenomenon, but there are several characteristics of contemporary migration that are distinctive. Today it is the changing context of a globalised world and the extent and scale of migration which makes it a key feature of the times. Most significant is the increase in female migration as independent migrants and not merely as associational migrants. According to the World Migration Report 2003, almost half of the estimated 175 million migrants worldwide are women. This phenomenon has been termed “feminisation of migration”.

Migrant, refugee, displaced person, illegal migrant, trafficked person – class and location determine how these different categories are viewed. The educated, upper middle class professional woman who migrates for work, the woman who migrates for marriage, the woman migrating as labour into the export processing zone factory, the woman migrating for seasonal agricultural labour, domestic labour, sex work, entertainment –the list is vast. The experience of these women is different and is shaped by different circumstances and the position of the woman, her family, community and the nation within a globalised economy and polity.

Globalisation and neo-liberal economic policies have precipitated migration due to increased opportunities for finding work in certain areas and impoverishment and disruption of livelihoods in others. The growth of export-oriented industries like garments, electronics and practices such as outsourcing and flexible labour have created a demand for female labour in certain locations. In addition migrant women are in demand in jobs of care, specifically domestic work, child and elder care. Another feature of contemporary migration

which has contributed to the demand for female labour has been the growing sex, entertainment and tourism sector.

The transnational character of production and services has created a market for migrant female labour which has led to large numbers of women migrating, nationally and internationally, whether from villages in Bangladesh to garment factories in Dhaka, Sri Lanka to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers, Thai women working in bars in Germany and Denmark, from Mexico to the US, northern Africa to Italy, and so on.

## **Migration and Trafficking**

Migration takes place both legally and illegally and this has been the primary concern of governments. Though migration is a worldwide phenomenon, it is highly controlled. States regulate the numbers and kinds of labour power that they want. Limited legal migration opportunities often lead to irregular and illegal forms of migration. Trafficking has been located as one of the possible outcomes of this process. Women in these situations are more likely to face human rights violations. Thus illegal crossing of borders, irregular migration and involvement of agents compound the vulnerabilities that women face when they migrate. The contexts within which trafficking and migration take place are often similar.

Over the past two decades, studies of cross border movements, especially of women, has been largely located within the framework of trafficking. Located within the framework of illegal crossing of borders and prostitution as the final destination, trafficking discourses foster strategies which will curtail movement. This has led to conceptualisation of the process of migration as

dangerous and negative for women. Women are seen as victims who need to be protected and the language is one of rescue, repatriation and rehabilitation.

There are multiple factors that increase women's vulnerabilities which are enhanced because of their structural position within patriarchal society. The conditions which allow for deception, coercion, bondage, violence and exploitation of labour are the daily realities of the lives of many girls and women. The inherent vulnerability that women face is enhanced when it operates in conjunction with other factors that limit the rights of workers in general - for instance, the nature of work (sex work, domestic work, dangerous work, prohibited work and so on) and the location of work (own country/foreign country, at home/outside home and so on).

It is important to recognise that less extreme forms of violations of these rights also exist but are less visible - in fact there is a continuum of violations, with "voluntary" migration at one end and trafficking at the other. If we accept that movement of people is a part of our history, present and future, then we need to explore new ways of understanding women's experiences of migration and labour.

### Feminisation of Labour

From the seventies, there has been a significant change in the process of industrialisation. Some of its features are a new international division of labour with relocation of production from developed to developing countries, growth of export oriented manufacturing industries, increasing influence of transnational companies and the feminisation of the labour force. Factors for this include industries wanting to keep costs low, decreasing household budgets and loss of employment for men. Gendered notions emphasizing the "nimble fingers" of young women workers and their capacity for hard work, especially in Asia, facilitated the recruitment of women for unskilled and semi-skilled work in labour-intensive industries at low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions. The percentage

of women in export processing factories, electronics and garment factories is very high, in some cases even 90% whereas in other industries it would normally be around 30-40%.

In the nineties there has been a fundamental shift towards "flexible" labour, to new forms of working and outsourcing, including temporary, part-time, casual, home-based etc. Flexibility has several different layers of meaning such as flexible job delineations, flexibility in hours of work, and in financial terms. The flexibility also includes a flexible labour force which can move and adapt to any of the new industries. Women often accept flexible working conditions because of their double and triple roles, but in most cases it has also meant casualisation and tremendous insecurity. The trend towards flexibility has meant that less workers have a formal position, increased subcontracting, and loss of any benefits that come with full time work within the formal economy.

The entry of large numbers of women into the labour market usually takes place under two different sets of extenuating circumstances - either when the economic situation is so terrible that women are forced to work under any kinds of conditions (and often accept very poor working conditions, e.g. the garment factories in Bangladesh); or in cases where due to rapid growth, multi-national corporations (MNCs) are willing to offer higher wages than those existing and better working conditions, including a modern lifestyle (e.g. electronics industry in Malaysia and Singapore).

### The Work of Care and Love

Another significant aspect of contemporary migration is the growth in demand for migrant women workers within the service sectors, specifically domestic and sexual services. The low value and status attached to these traditional female services have been reinforced in the contemporary situation. There are several migratory flows fed both by demand and supply. These flows are shaped by racialised stereotypes such as submissive eastern women as better "wives" or companions in the case of Thai mail order



brides. Similarly Caribbean women are seen as highly sexual and that is their appeal as sex workers; or the Sri Lankan and Filipina women who are preferred as domestic workers. This process of racial stereotyping, though present in most occupations, is most evident in the work of care.

The change has taken place at a global level where increasingly domestic tasks are being relocated to the market, both as goods and services. There is a shift of household functions to the labour market, which is serviced primarily by migrant women. The dynamic plays out whether it is internal migration from the village to the city, or from countries in the South to the North.

The State often encourages migration of women as they are considered earners of foreign revenue. For example Sri Lankan women remitted US \$880 million in 1998. The Sri Lankan government facilitates their migration as domestic workers to countries in the Gulf and even Italy by providing them lessons on working in foreign countries. Thai women are encouraged to work in Europe as entertainers, sex workers or wives and send money back home. Women are seen as more likely to remit money home to their families rather than spending it on themselves. The economic contribution of women migrant workers has been recognised in terms of foreign revenue, whether through remittances or the revenue generated locally.

Globalisation thus not only results in the mobility of capital, but also of labour, albeit controlled. It is important to locate all these forms of work within the global economy as they function to "sustain global corporate capital, First World identities and masculine hegemony" (Kempadoo, 1999). Migrant women workers around the world are holding up the economy and supporting their families through their low paid, low status and often invisible work.

#### Women and Work in the Informal Sector in India

In an economy segmented in complex ways to generate employment for millions of people, the informal or unorganised sector has an important

role to play. This sector has not only been credited with creating opportunities for livelihood for almost 90% of the population, but in the last decade has seen a tremendous expansion with the disruptions caused by neoliberal economic policies. The informal sector is not just a characteristic of the urban economy, as was suggested in early research by economists, but also predominant in the rural economy – an observation made by Jan Breman while working in South Gujarat (Breman, 1996). Both the rural and urban informal sectors are distinguished by their high absorption of both female labour and migrant labour.

The 1971 Nairobi conference organised by the International Labour Organization provided the following characteristics of informal activity: ease of entry; reliance on indigenous resources; family ownership of enterprise; small scale operation; operation in a semi-permanent or temporary structure or in a variable location; skills acquired outside the formal education system; and operation in unregulated and competitive markets. In addition, scholars have pointed out that informal sector is also characterised by lack of protection of rights of workers and high degree of exploitation, absence of labour laws, job insecurity, absence of workers' benefits and the absence of organised power for collective bargaining (Mazumdar, 1990).

The urban informal sector inherently appears to be a double-edged sword. While providing options for survival for millions, it brings with it a specific set of vulnerabilities and issues of rights of workers - including that of non payment of minimum wages, equal wages for equal work, harsh conditions of work, lack of benefits, lack of organised ways of negotiating and sexual exploitation.

These are compounded in the case of women workers, the majority of which are engaged in this sector and whose relationship with the labour market has by and large always been characterised by invisibility, undervaluation and vulnerability. In fact, the report of the Committee for the Status of Women 'Shramshakti' in 1975 brought to light for the first time the extent and nature of women's participation in the labour market and revealed that 94% of women workers remain untouched by

labour laws. Feminist scholarship and movements of trade unions and grassroots communities over the years have worked to give visibility and recognition to the work of women within the economy, and raised issues of their rights as workers.

Being based on the availability of cheap, casual, unskilled labour the urban informal sector in particular provides "a universe of limited opportunities and special vulnerability for illiterate desperate women" (Mazumdar, 1990). Women in the informal sector are also found to be in disproportionately higher numbers in certain occupations. Petty trading, food services, textile production, construction work and domestic service represent a few of the occupations typically dominated by women, occupations which are primarily an extension of the gender division of labour.

The context of an unregulated, and sometimes hidden (in the case of home-based work) workplace and unorganised, atomised workforce only sharpens the vulnerabilities inherent in the informal sector, and enables exploitation at different levels. This is made worse in the case of migrant women workers, for whom new structures of economy and society and the circumstances of the migration mean that their ability to negotiate is almost non-existent. Women have also been dependent on agents or middlemen to facilitate both their movement (in case of migrant women) and their entry into the labour market, which opens up other avenues for exploitation.

It is clear from existing studies and surveys that the work that migrant women are engaged in is primarily located within the unorganised or informal structure. Clearly this structures their experiences of the labour market and often increases the vulnerabilities that they have to face.

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# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

## 2

### Background for the Study

Jagori has been working on issues of trafficking, migration and rights of sex workers for over seven years. In our work so far, we have consistently come across serious problems in the availability and reliability of data on the above issues, which render intervention either impossible or ineffective, and uninformed. In an effort to begin addressing this gap, Jagori conducted a pilot study<sup>1</sup> in 2001 in selected districts of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Our initial consultations and forays into the field were conducted within the conceptual framework of trafficking. However, too limiting for us to understand, analyse and engage fully with all the emerging issues related to migration. Over the pilot study we felt that it was critical as a first step to focus on movement *per se*, that is, migration in itself, and explore its implications for women in particular. This approach is more amenable to understanding why women move in search of work, and the concomitant vulnerabilities inherent in the process of their movement.

Jagori has also been involved in a short five-country study<sup>2</sup> focusing on the demand for migrant female labour and possible linkages to trafficking. In this study the two areas of work focused on were domestic work and sex work. We also did a series of interviews with third party actors (those who benefited from the labour of migrant women workers in some way). The aim of the study was to

understand the nature of demand for certain kinds of labour and locate this within both issues of gender relations and broader economic and social changes.

With insights from both these studies, we were further convinced of the relevance of looking at women's experiences of migration and working in the unorganised sector. Further a study on migrant women workers also has the potential to address the gaps in migration research and the issues of rights of women workers.

This research study on '*Women's Experiences of Migration and Work in Delhi*' is located in the backdrop of these developments. The objective of the study was to fill a gap in migration research and examine the complex experiences of women in search of livelihoods within a framework of rights and vulnerabilities. The aim was to understand women's experiences of migration to Delhi: the process of movement, the vulnerabilities and imperatives that cause women to migrate, networks of movement and recruitment, and the vulnerabilities at the site of work.

### Methodology

Our basic theoretical premise was that women today are migrating in search of livelihoods, identity, survival and change. In the existing socio-economic and cultural context, we have found that women usually need networks and agents to make this movement possible and these networks are primarily kin based or village based. In the process of movement a complex set of factors render women vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and deceit. Thus women experience a continuum of violations in the process of migration which often

<sup>1</sup> *Migration, Trafficking and Sites of Work: Rights and Vulnerabilities*, JAGORI, 2001

<sup>2</sup> *The Demand Side of Trafficking*, Julia O'Connell Davidson and Bridget Anderson, University of Nottingham, 2002

Both these reports are available online at [www.jagori.org](http://www.jagori.org)

is not captured or revealed in existing frameworks of looking at the issue of women and migration. Once they reach the city, they face other vulnerabilities in the process of looking for work and at the site of work. A rights and vulnerabilities approach is necessary to understand and address these violations.

Principles of feminist research guided the methodology, wherein research itself is a tool of change aimed at enabling women to take control of their own lives, based on their personal and shared experiences and facilitated through collective processes.

This study was carried out over a period of one year (2003) in Delhi. Delhi is a city with a very large and growing population of migrant workers from many parts of the country. We identified several sites of work where migrant women workers are found. We approached women through their residence in the different slum areas. The nature of work they did made it difficult, if not impossible, to approach them at their work spaces. We also selected Delhi as the site of research as we felt it would enable us to create and build long-term interactions and interventions in the areas we carried out our research.

### *Research Questions*

The study was centered around the following basic research questions:

1. What are the conditions and structural factors which are causing women and families to move? What livelihood opportunities are closing down and what are the new sites of work that are opening up for women?
2. What are the networks which are used to move and how do women access them? What are the networks through which labour is recruited at different sites?
3. What are the vulnerabilities faced by women during the process of movement and at the sites of work?
4. What are the support structures that migrant women and families build in the new environment?
5. What is women's access to resources and structural position within the family and community, both at the point of origin and at the places to which they migrate?
6. What are the changes in perception of identities, home and work?

The focus in the study was on the experience of migration and participation in the labour market from women's perspectives and changes that take place in women's lives with movement. What are the changes in the way women look at themselves, their roles and relationships? What are their vulnerabilities in terms of abuse, health, education etc? How are they perceived and treated in their area of destination by communities who are already living and working there? What are their added vulnerabilities as workers in the informal/unorganised sector? What are their rights as citizens? What do women feel they have gained and/ or forfeited as an outcome of migration?

### *Sample*

The sample was selected through purposive sampling (going to the site and seeking informants who fit a particular profile – in this case, being a first generation migrant woman engaged in some kind of economic activity in the unorganised sector) and snowball methods (in which one interviewee would refer us to another woman, and so on). The primary site of the study was at the *basti* or slum settlements where women migrants reside. In a few cases we interviewed them at the work site. We selected seven slum settlements in South Delhi, out of twelve settlements surveyed in the initial stages of the study, on the basis of the profile of the residents of these areas.

The study was done through a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research was carried out in two stages – first was a demographic questionnaire to gather basic demographic information about their lives, families, education, work history and patterns, health, and the basic amenities to which they have access. The second stage was the in-depth interviews where the focus was on understanding the narratives of their lives and movement. Fifty-

four migrant women were interviewed during the study. Informal group discussions were also organised on certain issues as and when the women were available, in which women other than the respondents were able to contribute and voice their opinions on various issues.

### *Profile of Respondents*

#### *General findings from Quantitative Data*

The total number of households in the sample was fifty-four (54), the total number of persons in the sample was two hundred and fifty-eight (258). The field sites were seven (7) localities in South Delhi: East of Kailash, Hanuman Camp, Govindpuri, Srinivaspuri, Greater Kailash, Dakshinpuri and Madanpur Khadar.

*Table No. 1 Sex Ratio of Sample*

Sex	Frequency	% of Sample
Male	138	53.5
Female	120	46.5
Total	258	100

Although the main informants were women, the household composition of the sample shows the predominance of males. This is in keeping with the composition of migrant communities, since the number of men migrating is higher than the number of women.

*Table No 2.: Age Range of Sample*

Age Range in Years	Frequency	% of Sample
Below 1	4	1.6
1-10	72	27.8
11-20	64	24.7
21-30	49	18.9
31-40	40	15.4
41-50	22	8.3
51-60	3	1.5
61-70	3	1.5
71-80	0	0
81-90	1	0.3
Total	258	100

In keeping with the profile of migrant population groups, the sample comprises a majority of children and young persons within the reproductive age

group of 15-45 years of age. Due to the salience of mobility and productivity, such groups rarely comprise large numbers of old persons. Around 85% of the sample is below 40 years of age.

*Table No. 3; Educational Level of Sample*

Educational level	Frequency	% of Sample
Illiterate	100	38.8
Literate but without formal schooling	25	9.6
Less than primary	62	24
Primary	40	15.5
Middle	11	4.3
Matriculate	10	.3.9
Intermediate	7	2.8
BA/BSc	3	1.1
MA/MSc	0	0
Professional degree/diploma	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	258	100

As expected the majority of the sample (around 70%) comprises persons who are either reported to be totally illiterate, literate without formal schooling or less than primary.

*Table No. 4: Marital Status of Sample*

Marital Status	Frequency	% of Sample
Now married	100	38.9
Never married	141	54.7
Widowed	10	3.8
Divorced	1	0.3
Separated	6	2.3
Total	258	100

Due to the age profile of the sample with around 50% falling in the age group of less than 20 years, more than 50% of the sample comprises persons who have never been married.

The caste of the respondents were varied and show no distinct trends. While the proportion of high caste Brahmins was limited to around 8% of the

total number of households, the others were spread over middle and lower castes (Chaudhry, Yadavs, Mondols, Valmikis), amongst both Hincus and Muslims. There are a large number of occupation-based castes like Teli (the oil extractors/sellers), jyotishis (the astrologers), malhar (the boatmen), darzi (the tailors) and dhobis (washermen). However they are not necessarily practicing their traditional occupations, although they mention practicing these in their villages. While some of the men may still be practicing their traditional occupation, none of the women are. Muslim respondents also gave varied caste identities (Shaikh, Pathan, Kazi and so on).

*Table No. 5: Religion of sample*

Religion	Frequency	% of Sample
Hindu	128	49.6
Muslim	110	42.7
Sikh	0	0
Christian	20	7.7
Buddhist	0	0
Jain	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	258	100

The sample comprises mainly of Hindus followed by Muslims and Christians. While the ranking of the three religious groups is more or less representative of these groups in the general population, this is not the case in absolute numbers.

*Table No. 6: Participation in Labour Force*

Nature of Work	Frequency	% of Sample
Public sector	2	0.8
Private sector	14	5.4
Informal sector	65	25.1
Self-employed	21	8.1
Home-based work	6	2.3
Housework	6	2.3
Unemployed	23	8.9
Retired	0	0
Out of labour force	121	46.9
Total	258	100

Keeping with the age profile and marital status of the sample around 46% consist of dependent

persons who are out of the labour force. From among those who are gainfully employed, the majority are working in the informal sector which constitutes a little over one fourth of the sample.

*Table No. 7: Income Range of Employed Persons in Sample*

Income Range	Frequency	% of Sample
Less than Rs.1500	47	43.5
Rs.1500-3000	46	42.6
Rs. 3000-5000	6	5.6
More than Rs.5000	2	1.9
Not known	7	6.5
Total	108	100

There are a total of 108 employed persons, which constitutes less than half the sample (41.9%). Rs.6000 per month is the upper limit of reported monthly income. Interestingly, an almost equal proportion of the sample falls within the income brackets of less than Rs.1500 and between Rs.1500-3000.

*Table No. 8: School Attendance of Children in Age Group of 6-18 years*

Educational Status	Frequency	% of Sample
School-going	38	42.2
Non school-going	52	57.8
Total	90	100

There are 90 children (34.9% of sample) who technically fall within the age group of school-going children. Of these more than 50% are not attending school. The reasons cited for not attending school altogether or dropping out are

1. It was not considered necessary
2. Lack of money
3. Person's help needed in household.

*Table No. 9: Duration of Residence in Locality*

Duration	Frequency	% of Sample
Less than 1 year	44	17
More than 1 year	214	83
Total	258	100

The overwhelming majority of informants have been residing in the locality for at least a year.

Table No 10: Migration Status

Migration Status	Frequency	% of Sample
Migrant	148	57.3
Non-migrant	110	42.7.
Total	258	100

More than 50% of the sample reports being migrant which means that they were not born in Delhi and moved to the city either as children or adults. It needs to be remembered that persons being reported as non-migrants are mostly children born in Delhi. Some of them may, however, also be adults who moved to Delhi as young children. Due to the long duration of residence in the city, they consider themselves as non-migrants.

The main reasons cited for migration to Delhi are:

1. Economic reasons (55.7%)
2. Personal/family reasons (primarily marriage) 36.5%

Table No. 11: Decade of Migration

Decade	No. of Persons in Sample	% of Sample of Migrants
1970-1980	16	10.8
1981-1990	41	27.8
1991-2000	58	39.1
2001-Present	24	16.2
No Information	9	6.1
Total	148	100

The sample mainly comprises migrants who have come to Delhi after 1990 (58% of those who have migrated).

The sample reflects state migration patterns with the maximum number of persons coming from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. Various push factors cause large-scale out-migration of unskilled workers and their families from these areas to other areas of increased economic activity. One ambiguity is that many Bangladeshis report themselves as coming from West Bengal. An attempt was made to corroborate this data on reported place of origin by matching it

with the information obtained from ethnographic interviews, although inconsistencies still remained.

Table No.12 Place of Migration

State	No. of Persons	% of Sample of Migrants
Assam	3	2
West Bengal	32	21.6
Rajasthan	6	4
Chhattisgarh	1	.7
Madhya Pradesh	20	13.5
Uttar Pradesh	39	26.4
Nepal	4	2.7
Jharkhand	3	2
Bihar	32	21.6
Haryana	6	4
Bangladesh	1	0.7
Not known	1	0.7
Total	148	100

Table No. 13: Chronic Morbidity in Sample

Chronic Illness	No. of Persons
Heart problem (BP)	3
Diabetes	2
Thyroid (other endocrinological disorder)	1
Arthritis/Spondylitis)	2
Asthma (respiratory problem)	1
Infertility	0
Anemia	1
Mental disorder	1
Permanent disability	3
Epilepsy	3
Other	6
Total	23

23 persons suffer from some chronic illness which comes to 8.9% of sample, the main conditions being permanent disabilities (polio, epilepsy). Only 3 persons reported suffering from heart problem and 2 persons suffering from diabetes. No other lifestyle related illnesses were reported. Low reporting of chronic conditions is a common feature of poor population groups While there may actually be lower incidence of life-style related

diseases, there may also be under-detection and under-diagnosis of chronic conditions among the poor.

*Table No.14: Acute Morbidity in Sample*

Acute Illness	No. of Persons
TB	3
Injury/Accident	10
Typhoid	2
Malaria	3
Diarrhea/Intestinal problem	4
Cataract /eye problem	1
Fever	3
Reproductive Problem	1
Jaundice	1
Other	4
Total	34

34 persons suffer from some acute illness (17.4% of sample) with the main conditions being accidents and injuries followed by stomach infections, serious fever and TB. Higher incidence of acute problems and among acute conditions, a predominance of accidents/injuries has been observed in poor population groups whose living conditions expose them more to all types of environmental hazards, both natural and human.

*Table No.15: Pattern of Medical Consultation*

Illness Episode	No. of Episodes
Chronic (Only govt health facility)	7
Chronic (Only private health facility)	9
Chronic (Both)	5
Acute (only govt. health facility)	9
Acute (Only private health facility)	15
Acute (Both)	6

Private practitioner consultation is higher in the case of both acute and chronic illness episodes. But depending on the seriousness of the condition and the kind of expenditure necessary, in some illness episodes there is a combination of both private and government health facilities.

#### *Work Affected During Illness*

In chronic illness most number of informants reported work being affected between 6 months to a year. As expected, in the case of majority of acute illness episodes the duration is anywhere between less than two weeks to 6 months.

#### *Financing of Treatment*

Main source of financing for medical treatment is personal savings reported followed by assistance by relatives and friends.

#### *Treatment Cost*

The cost of treatment for acute illness ranges from Rs 200 to Rs.17,999. The latter was reported in the context of a case of TB. There may be some exaggeration on this count because very often a person may report seeing a private practitioner, who may in fact be a quack. The observation of medical practice in low income areas in Delhi shows that there is a range of healthcare providers who fall within the general category of 'private practitioners' who provide services at a rate of Rs.20-100.

The expenditure for chronic illness ranges from Rs.400 to Rs.30,000. The latter was reported in the lone case of a person suffering from both heart disease and diabetes. Chronic illnesses do entail more expense than acute illnesses because many of them require maintenance medication.

*Table No. 16 Recovery from Illness*

Illness Episode	Persons reported to have recovered	Total Number of Persons	% of persons continuing to suffer from Acute/Chronic Illness in Sample
Chronic	3	23	7.8
Acute	16	34	6.9
Total	19	57	25

Around 25% of the total sample reports some illness, either acute or chronic. Of this 33% of the persons reporting either an acute or chronic illness episode have reported recovering from the disease.



Table No. 17: Asset Ownership of Households

Item	% of Households in Sample
Fan	77.8
House (Jhuggi)	55.6
TV	48.1
Cooler	31.5
Bicycle	27.8
Radio	24.1
Heater	9.3
Phone	9.3
Cart	7.4
Refrigerator	3.7
Car	3.7
Cell Phone	3.7
Rikshaw	1.9
Scooter	1.9
Auto	0

Over half the sample has their own shanties (*jhuggis*). However, since the *jhuggis* are mostly situated on unauthorised land from which residents are constantly in danger of being evicted, the issue of ownership is problematic. The most commonly owned articles by households in the study are fan, TV, cooler, bicycle and radio.

Table No. 18: Access to Amenities

Item	% of Households in Sample
Voter ID card	75.9
Ration card	57.4
Bank Account	24.1
Electricity meter	22.2
Water meter	0

Around three-fourths of the sample possess voter ID cards which is the fundamental document of both citizenship and place of residence. Consequently, this raises the question if they are really migrants in the definitional sense of the term. A little more than half the households in the sample also possess a ration card. Interestingly, a little less than one fourth claim to have a bank account and none of the households averred to possessing a water meter, although some did claim to have an electricity meter.

Table No. 19: Households Access to Basic Facilities

Item	% of Households in Sample
Drinking Water Source: tap, municipal pipe and hand pump	90.7
Drinking Water Shared among area residents	98.1
Water available on premises	38.9
Water distance (0.5Km)	53.7
Water scarcity	85.9
Drinking Water Source when scarce from usual source (tap, municipal pipe and hand pump)	50
Drinking Water Source when scarce from usual source (tanker)	33.3
Distance (0.5 Km) of secondary water source.	27.8
Payment for water for last 12 months (bet Rs. 10-2000)	29.6
No Payment for water	70.4
Maintenance/repairs of tap/hand pump during past 12 months (Bet Rs. 10-1600)	53.7
No payment for maintenance/repairs of Tap/hand pump	46.3
Service Latrine (community Sauchalaya)	59.3
Latrine (field)	37
Garbage (collector)	10.4
Source of lighting (electricity)	83.3
No Lighting	9.3
Electricity cost for past 12 months (Bet 25-4000)	77.8
No payment for electricity	22.2
Main Fuel (kerosene (37%) followed by LPG and firewood (25.9% each)	88.9
Secondary fuel (most common kerosene (33%) followed by firewood (20.4%))	53.7

The main source of drinking water for the members of the sample is the common water pump or open municipal pipe. The water source is shared in common with other residents of the area. The main water source is not more than half a kilometer away. The large majority of residents

report scarcity from main water source. In such scarcity other sources of water such as government tanker are availed of. Despite not having a water meter, a little over one quarter of the sample households reported contributing to payment for water between Rs. 10 and 2000 during the past one year. A little over 50% of households also reported paying towards repairs/maintenance of common water source ranging from Rs. 10 to 1600 during past 12 months.

Most households reported using the public toilets (*sauchalaya*) followed by those using fields. Only around 10% of the households reported garbage being collected by municipality in their area. Despite the small number of households possessing their own electricity meter, over 80% households reported having electricity as the main source of lighting for their homes. Like water, most of the electricity is obtained illegally by hooking onto running electricity wires. A member of the community is paid to tap the wires.

Kerosene is the main fuel for the majority of households followed by LPG and firewood.

#### *Action-research and feminist methodology*

Feminist research methodologies are often centred around action-research, in which intervention is central to the research and a way of empowering those who are the 'subject'. Through this research also, the Jagori group and the research team in particular intervened at different stages in the lives of the women who comprised the sample or lived in the same field area, thereby taking it beyond a traditional interviewer/ interviewee relationship.

Getting a foothold in the field sites and building trust in our interviewees meant that it was important to get involved with some aspects of their lives. In fact, we found that our most important contribution to the women we interviewed and the communities we entered into dialogue with was the support we offered through different kinds of interventions. These ranged from being asked to intervene in domestic disputes, being a sounding board for women facing domestic violence, providing information on health issues and medical facilities, finding out where they could

go for free medical advice, especially gynaecological advice, subsidized healthcare, and even accompanying them on these visits, including accompanying them for surgical operations.

During the time when the research was going on, two of the colonies in which we had done the field-work, were demolished within a short span of time. Some of the residents (approximately 152 out of the total 900) were given new plots of land at a far-off resettlement colony. The demolition shattered everyone's lives. For those who did not get the plot, it was particularly difficult as they were left completely stranded and homeless; they had to go elsewhere and begin life anew. However it was not easy even for those who did get the plot of land. They faced various crises: the loss of livelihoods because everyone had to now travel to large distances for work and thus had to spend more on commuting than what they would earn, loss of homes, belongings, business, and so on. Our constant support during the time of demolition, and running around with them to the municipal corporation office (MCD) and other offices to get their documentation ready, efforts at networking with other groups working on the issue of slum demolition, were an important part of building strong relationships. We also continue to make sustained visits to those displaced in their new plots in the far-off Madanpur Khadar, and try and support them in any way possible.

#### Report of Findings

The following chapters provide an analysis of various aspects of the qualitative interviews. Chapter 3 looks at the context and process of migration the women have undergone. Chapter 4 examines the experiences of living in the city, and Chapter 5 looks at their experiences in different kinds of work within the informal sector. Chapter 6 contains some case studies, and stories of women in their own voices. The final chapter highlights some concerns that the findings raise, and looks at some areas of advocacy and further exploration that is required to strengthen the rights of women workers in the informal sector.

## “THE STOMACH TAKES YOU THERE”: THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION

# 3

There are three important factors to analyse while looking into the process of migration: the reasons for migration, the process of moving to the city and the factors influencing the decision to continue in the city. All of our respondents were first generation migrants and a majority of them had been living in Delhi for the past ten to fifteen years. The response to the question ‘Why did you come to Delhi’ was more often than not, met with the response that ‘it was a question of survival’. However, an in-depth exploration of their journey brought out issues contributing to a better understanding of women’s role in the whole process and its links to the economic, social and political realities.

### The Reasons for Migration

#### *Issue of survival*

A complete lack of livelihood is one among the main reasons for many to migrate. In the words of one woman, when asked about the reasons to settle down in Delhi, ‘*pet apne aap le jaata hai*’ (‘the stomach takes you there’). Major changes that have happened in the past decades in the rural and agricultural sector due to globalisation have an important role to play in this regard. Some others had lost their agricultural land and other living opportunities due to droughts, floods and other disasters.

#### *From a tenant to a wage labourer*

As is the case of Meera, with only ‘*do beegha zameen*’ (not even one acre of land, a *beegha* is an Indian land measure equivalent to around one third of an acre), agriculture gave no feasible returns. So some decided to sell their land and many became tenant labourers. Among those who migrated to Delhi, few still owned small pieces of land in their villages. They considered migrating to

the city both as a matter of status and a better option than working in other people’s land, and also because they could earn wages in cash. Many among these migrants had visited Delhi a few times before they settled down. Some of them felt that farming in the village required a lot more labour than work in the city and did not want to stay in the village doing these kinds of activities.

#### *Better earning possibilities in Delhi*

The other side of the coin is that, in the context of globalisation and privatisation, there are increased opportunities of work in the unorganised sector in the cities. A section of these migrants are well aware and informed of the possibilities for women getting casual paid work in the city. The way the networks of and for these migrants function is closely linked to the type and nature of work available. They were well aware that if one can afford to arrange some money to reach Delhi and survive till finding some work, things should be better in future.

#### *Marriage related migration*

In many cases the respondents mentioned marriage as the reason to migrate. The marital status of our respondents shows that while 41/54 (68.5%) of the women were currently married, 8/54 (14.8%) were widowed and one woman stated that she was divorced. Further, 17/54 (31.9%) women reported personal reasons including marriage as the reason for migration while 35/54 (64.8%) among them reported economic factors as primary reason for migration. Some have come to Delhi immediately after marriage since their husbands were already working in Delhi. In some other cases, few months or years after marriage, the family migrated together. However, whether as a single parent or with the husband (immediately after marriage or later) for a good majority the main reason to

migrate remained primarily economic. While pressing economic needs and the search for survival options are primary reasons for migration here there is a change in women's role from being 'associational migrants' to 'economic agents'. Increasing possibilities of women's earning capacity in the cities clearly have a major role in their decision to migrate.

#### *Bangladeshi migrants*

Statistics from different sources on Bangladeshi people living in Delhi show widely varied numbers, i.e. from 300,000 to around 1.5 million. A majority of them have come to Delhi via West Bengal and Bihar. Even though this movement of Bangladeshi migrants is not a new phenomenon, the approach towards this issue has changed with the rising numbers in the past decades. For the present government, issues of national identity and security are of special concern. It was therefore not surprising that even in a settlement known locally as being a settlement of Bangladeshi migrants, most of them did not want to reveal their identity as such.

Our demographic data shows the highest number of our respondents had migrated to Delhi from Bihar (21.6%) and West Bengal (21.6%). Only four of our respondents ultimately identified themselves as Bangladeshi. According to them, the recent changes in the political context and the relations between India and Bangladesh clearly affect their individual lives. It is reflected when it comes to the issue of their visits to home and of continuing relationship with the life and people there. Crossing the border is not as easy as before, they claim, or has become too risky to think about now. If they are caught now, the threat to their life is much more severe than in the past. Now, they visit their homes very rarely or they don't visit at all. A respondent from Bangladesh, when asked about the last time she visited home, replied:

*"I have been to my village only once in the past five years. I stayed there for one month and five days. I went there one month ago. I paid Rs.750/- for a reserved train ticket. This train goes till Cooch Behar and from there to my village I pay Rs 50 for another vehicle. We try to cross the border when*

*the security police at the border go for lunch around 1 or 1:30 pm. We pay a hundred rupees to another person to keep a watch on the police whether they are returning from their meals. It is just a thin wire that marks the border. So quickly we pull the wire and enter Bharat. I would come back the same way. Once I was caught while crossing the border and was asked so many questions. I told I came to meet my mother and many such excuses. The person with me had to bribe the police tucking notes worth Rs.200/- in his hand".*

The life situations of these Bangladeshi migrants in the slums of Delhi are very complex. While they too migrate to Delhi for the same reasons, mainly economic, for better wages and living conditions, instead of being considered as 'economic migrants' they are labeled as 'illegal infiltrators'.

#### The Move to the City

##### *Networks and information*

Prior to the move, a majority of migrants had relatives or friends in Delhi and had information and networks about ways to make a living in Delhi. More and more information and new networks within the villages and communities contribute at every stage to increasing levels of migration. For some women, their husbands have already worked or have been working in Delhi before the family joined them in the city. The presence of many close relatives were often mentioned.

Some migrant women accompanied their husbands immediately after marriage as he was already working in the city. Some others migrated at a later stage with their children, relatives and/ or extended community. In the case of specific groups of migrants such as the seasonal construction workers and community of astrologers – *jyotishis* – they migrate as families or groups. The *jyotishis*, for example, have come in clusters from Madhya Pradesh or Maharashtra to Delhi and live adjacent to each other in the *basti*.

##### *The Journey*

The interviews reveal that the journey to the city was usually planned and made under tenuous and

difficult circumstances. Many of them borrowed money from relatives or friends or from moneylenders for travel and other initial expenses. If coming from a distant place, these families traveled in very crowded trains with no place to sit or put their luggage. Some mentioned that they had to cancel their tickets or postpone their journey three to four times because of the same reason. Some had no ticket at all while others paid anything between Rs.150 to Rs.600 and traveled with reservation. In the case of the *jyotishi* community, the move to Delhi was not a direct one since they traveled from place to place before settling down in Delhi. In the case of seasonal construction workers the contractor or builder (*tekdar* or *munshi*) organises and controls all details of their travel to the city each season.

### The Decision to Stay

While talking about leaving their villages, many interviewees were very emotional. In the words of Anjali from East of Kailash, '*bilkul man nahin kar raha tha ghar chhodke ana ka*' ('I just did not have the heart to leave home'). For Kalavati in Hanuman Camp, '*aisa lega ke saari duniya chod aaye*' ('I felt like I was leaving the world behind me...'). Most however have not severed ties with the village or area they came from, many of them have children or relatives left behind in the village and visit them once or twice a year. Though the number of visits depends on the distance they have to travel, there are also some women who rarely go back, and some who never went back since they have 'nothing there'. While they were nostalgic with memories of their life at home and emotional while talking about it, the women were also very clear in pointing out the reality that going back was not a feasible option. As Sarita Devi a factory worker in Govind Puri put it, '*vapas jake vaham kya deedar khayenge*' ('if we go back there, what will we eat, the walls?').

Clearly Delhi provides them better chances to survive. For the family as a whole, the increasing possibilities of women getting paid work is an important factor contributing to the family staying back. Since many of them were compelled to leave the village for survival, even though in tough living

conditions, the city provides them with better opportunities to earn in cash. Whether educated or not, compared to the village, they feel their children too have better possibilities of getting work here. In the words of Zubaida a self-employed woman from East of Kailash, in future, '*we would like to live a comfortable life...like you people*'.

Many have borrowed money to come to Delhi. Some had to borrow large amounts also due to other reasons such as health-related problems, paying dowry, children's education and so on. The cycle of debt is more or less part of life for many of the women. If they end up unable to repay, especially to moneylenders who might add huge interests to the loan, it may lead to being 'trapped' in the city for a longer stay.

A different life in the city, the bright lights, the bustle, the culture of consumption and entertainment were perceived both as positive and negative. It is clear that for many of them, liking or disliking the city is not a very important factor in their decision to stay back. However, the young find the city life interesting and the life in the village quite boring. For some parents, as in the case of someone like Jyoti in Govind Puri, it is matter of concern that '*the children are after the city life*'.

For the seasonal migrants, the move to the city is temporary and their relationship with the city is defined by this. Owning a *jhuggi* or keeping other belongings as possessions is not a habit or neither is it seen to be feasible. In every trip they make, they take with them whatever they earn. They see themselves as 'migrants forever', like nomads on the move.

Many consider the village as their 'real home'. They divide their life between the city and the village during the harvest and non-harvest seasons. For many of them, even though they liked Delhi life, not having a ration card or voter card invalidate their existence here as citizens.

For the seasonal migrants doing construction labour in Delhi, the experience of the city

therefore somewhat different. For them the city is hostile and too expensive to contemplate living in. Indeed, their main priority is to earn enough to go back and live comfortably in the village. Not having a home of their own in the city or the knowledge that they will never be able to afford to have one, makes them feel clearly detached from

this city. As visible in the words of Savita a seasonal construction worker in Dakshin Puri:

*"I like Delhi. I would have stayed back if I had my own home, a ration card, other papers etc., but not like this. We are like nowhere. We travel from here to there, there to here only to make some money. Even if I want to live in Delhi, how can this money be enough?"*

# “YOU SHOULD SEE PATNA, ITS WORSE!”

## LIFE IN THE CITY

# 4

A majority of the respondents interviewed in the course of our research have been residing in Delhi for well over 10–15 years. Questions about an entire gamut of life experiences, spread over such a long period of time, yielded diverse narratives about the problems of making a life in a city like Delhi. Here we examine some facets of the everyday lives of migrant women living and working in Delhi. While many came with full knowledge of what to expect from life in the city, for others it was a novel and sometimes intimidating experience. For all of them though, ‘the city’ was an entity in itself, characterised by very different values, lifestyles, opportunities and constraints than they were accustomed to. Questions about what the city meant to them, how they thought their lives had changed and whether, on balance, they were satisfied with their decision to settle here, evoked varied responses.

The experience of the city, and the various dimensions of building a home and a life within it, had three major aspects. First was the possibility the city offered of *re-discovering and renegotiating spaces, relationships, and identities*. What do women think of the physical space of their homes and immediate neighbourhood? Of public spaces such as work spaces, markets and public transport? What is their experience of going out of the home to do paid work for the first time? What are the links, if any, that they maintain with their native villages, what are the new links and networks of interaction that they have established in the city? How are traditional boundaries between the home and outside blurred or sharpened? How are new relationships and identities forged in the process?

Secondly, we examine their *vulnerabilities and the complete lack of rights* that frame their life as poor

migrant women working in the informal sector. Does the state guarantee them access to basic and essential civic amenities, minimum wages, relief and rehabilitation in the face of potential threats to life, livelihood and property? Do they have to endure violations of bodily and emotional dignity, and what support systems can they access in case of such violations? What are their overwhelming concerns?

Finally, how do these women configure and understand the city in which they live and work. What does their work and life *mean* to them?

### Spaces, Relationships and Identities

#### *Finding housing and work*

From wide-open spaces to a tiny *jhuggi* in a congested slum cluster, the journey to the city is followed by the search for housing. Different people go through different experiences of finding a house in the city. Most however, are assisted by natal or marital kin, or members of the village community who have already settled here. Often loans are taken for renting a house, buying a plot of land and building a house, and these are repaid over years. Some communities migrate in stages, setting up temporary homes in other cities before eventually settling in Delhi. Even within the city, they would shift rented accommodations till they eventually settled in one place and built their own ‘*makaan*’ there, (usually after having worked and saved for a few years). Some communities that travel together have well-established networks that make a space for them when they arrive (such as the *jjotishi* community in Govindpuri). Others such as the seasonal migrants of Dakshinpuri are unfailingly provided accommodation for their stay here by the contractor who employs them.

Living in the city certainly involved adjusting to a severely compromised physical space- most of the homes were tiny plots, opening out into drains with stagnant sewage water; the localities were characterised by an almost complete absence of civic amenities like, clean drinking water, safe electricity, and adequate sanitation. Champa, a domestic worker, states that *"Life in the city can never be compared to that in the village. Gaon to gaon hi hota hai. Kitna bhi ho to yeh to jhuggi hi hai (Whatever it is, after all this is a jhuggi). Our Allahabad is like the Connaught Place of Delhi. In the beginning I used to feel very bad about the dirt and filth lying all around. I didn't want to stay here then. Now, after staying here for all these years, in have got used to it."*

Sania bibi, a vendor, laments that *"Sometimes the jhuggi catches fire from the open electric wires all over, or from firewood or any medium of cooking. The fire spreads fast and there is unwanted destruction."*

Owning a space (over 50% of *jhuggis* were owned by the household) was an important part of life in the city, as was the building of a '*pakka*' house after a shanty, and there was a perceived sense of security in achieving this. Many single women that we interviewed took considerable pride in the fact that they had built up their houses, unassisted, saving up over many years- often only one wall at a time.

The actual security, however, of finally owning land and a house in the city after such painstaking labour was questionable - it was always underlined with an awareness of the temporariness of the *jhuggi*. The threat of demolition was ever present; indeed the East of Kailash *jhuggi* was demolished even as our fieldwork was in progression.

#### *The public sphere*

In many narratives there was a sense of being intimidated by the city- its 'bigness', hostility, lack of safety, the fear of getting lost. The public sphere also emerged as being threatening for women; most instances of sexual harassment seemed to have taken place on the streets, in buses.

*"I was not scared because my husband was with me. But I used to be scared of going out. Lagta tha ki rasta bhool jayange. (It felt like I would lose my way.) I have never come alone from my village, I feel scared of travelling alone. Dar lagta hai ki koi dhokha na de de...(I was scared of being duped.)"* remembers Savita, a seasonal migrant. Zarina, a factory worker, adds *"I was confused about how a city like would like when I came first. Uljhan si lagti thi. I spent a lot of money on travelling, a minimum of 5-6 hundred rupees."*

At the same time the city seemed to offer women a certain anonymity, greater mobility and freedom from some of the traditional strictures of village life, such as women not being allowed to freely move and work in public and so on.

*"We did not have land in the village - we were jyothishi there also - although some people from the community did kheti as labourers. I myself did not work outside the home in the village. There people would speak badly if we moved and worked outside the home - "kaise bahu hai", they would say? ("What kind of a wife/ daughter-in-law is this!") We had to do ghunghat (cover our faces) and could not walk around freely like we do here in the city",* says Shashi, now a self-employed vendor. Kiran, a domestic worker, was not phased at arriving in the city. She says, *"The city was not so bad...you should see Patna, its worse."*

#### *Working in the city*

A very important feature of women's move to the city is their entering paid work, outside the sphere of household work and that of care. In the village some women did agricultural work, but this was seen as an extension of domestic work and thus was invisibilised. Entering the workforce in the city was a key factor in changing the way women organised their lives, negotiated relationships and their identities.

Most women migrants started work some time after coming to the city (from a few days to a few months to a few years). Some of the reasons that forced them into low-paid and insecure employment in the urban informal sector were the inability to make ends meet, (husband



unemployed, does not earn enough) repayment of debts and loss of a husband due to death or desertion.

On being asked their opinion on how they felt about going out and doing paid work, the standard responses were '*karna padhta hai*', '*majboori hai*' ('we have to, it's necessary'). In most cases, women had to negotiate with husband or relatives to be able to do so. As Mala, a factory worker, recalls "*No I didn't work in the village. Here 'majboori hai' so I have to. My maternal cousin used to come and look me up. She told me that there is work in factories. Pehle to dil nahin maana. My husband scolded me. I said, 'provide for me and I won't go.'*"

Most often women found work through neighbours, acquaintances and relatives. They did the kind of work that most women in the surrounding area did. Thus in East of Kailash we encountered mostly domestic workers, in Govindpuri, factory workers and Srinivaspuri, construction workers.

The actual conditions under which women started work were different- some women had to do home-based work as their husbands would not allow them to work outside, others worked despite what their husbands said, still others accompanied their husbands to the city with the sole aim of earning and supplementing the family income.

Though it was a combination of circumstances that led them to work, women's sense of their own agency that working outside the home gave them cannot be discounted. Entering paid work visibilised their labour and empowered them to negotiate on certain things with their family. The decision to work was also a conscious decision to take charge of the household, regulate expenditure, pay off debts, educate and marry the children and so on. Being earning members often exposed women to taunts and abuse from their husband, but the narratives show that it is liberating despite hardships and puts them in a position of some strength and resilience vis-à-vis their husband, family and community.

### *Links and networks of support*

Processes of settling into homes and jobs, and frequent visits to the native village, indicated that village and community networks continued to remain strong. But equally important are the networks that are established in the course of living in the city- with neighbours, employers and co-workers. Domestic workers in particular spoke of help and support from their employers (support in the event of domestic violence, helping with children's education, during illnesses). Factory workers, particularly in Govindpuri, exhibited ties of friendship and reciprocity across communities. Relationships with the surrounding community were different in different cases, and depended on a number of factors. For instance, the *jyotishi* community relies mainly on its own intra-community networks to support its members. They even have a revolving fund to which its members contribute; they help each other find homes and work, they also live very close together. At the same time, the surrounding community acts as a watchdog; single women specially were often subject to taunts and jibes, they felt vulnerable to allegations and overtures from other men and were also acutely conscious of maintaining social proprieties.

### *Identities*

The move from the village to the city is accompanied by another shift- a silent transformation into a worker, wage earner and entrepreneur. Women are very much aware of their responsibilities- of the pressure to keep their families alive, struggle for a better life and better prospects, for their children if not for themselves. There is also a sense of pride in their accomplishments: of having single-handedly raised their children, bought their *jhuggi*, or having married off their sons and daughters, and of being the principal provider for the household.

However there are other identities apart from that of worker or homemaker that women have to negotiate. In East of Kailash we came across Muslim women having taken on Hindu aliases in order to find work. Moreover, this *basti* was known for the presence of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, a source of much conflict and contestation. Only

four of the women we interviewed would admit to being Bangladeshi, clearly there were many more.

Despite the positive, extraordinary aspects of women working in the city, it emerges from their narratives that these are sometimes crushed by the constant awareness of their status in the city. The recognition that their identity is framed in poverty, that they will always be from the *jhuggi*.

### Rights and Vulnerabilities

The lives of migrant women seem to be characterised by a complete lack of the right to a life of dignity- as migrants, as slum dwellers, workers in the informal sector. Migrant women are vulnerable in many different ways.

#### a. Vulnerabilities related to the Social Structure

##### *Harsh external environment, health problems*

Firstly, the limitations imposed on them by their external surroundings, often lead to deterioration in their health. When it comes to accessing safe housing and very basic amenities, the state seems to have failed dramatically in the case of poor and migrant *jhuggi* dwellers. The incidence of ailments such as stomach ailments, fevers and weakness was high. The overwhelming problem was that of water. Acute scarcity led to fights in the neighbourhoods, often women rose at extremely early hours to fetch water from long distances, or spent most of their mornings waiting for the municipal tanker. Some women mentioned the surrounding garbage and drains with distaste. Open electric wires very near wet spaces constantly threatened to spark, and start fires.

While our demographic data gives a breakdown by percentage of types of illnesses affecting the women and their families, what it does not reveal is the enormous fear and insecurity of falling ill in a hostile environment. The cost of adequate and timely healthcare is prohibitive, there is no knowledge of or access to government health schemes, insurance policies and so on. The woman is often the sole breadwinner, and missing even a few days of work may plunge the family into starvation. The husband and/ or extended family in such a situation may also be unsympathetic and

unhelpful. The statistics also do not reveal the tremendous resilience that many women displayed in the face of such crippling circumstances. Health problems presented an area where Jagori's interventions were very much needed. We helped several women get treated for illnesses such as gynecological problems and eye problems.

##### *Sexual harassment and domestic violence*

Many of the respondents had experienced violence in their lives: in the home, in the workplace and in public places. Domestic violence among the women that we interviewed was rampant, and they were candid in talking about it. They were far more reticent in talking about sexual harassment in public places and at the workplace. It seemed from their responses that women did not see domestic violence or even sexual violence by their husbands as compromising their sense of their own family honour in any way. Some were clearly scarred by frequent exposure to domestic violence and many women even resisted, protested and combated it in whatever way they could, but it was more or less viewed as a part of everyday life, something to be expected from a husband.

The most common response to questions of sexual harassment however, was to completely deny any instances of harassment- they had never heard of it, it had never happened to them. Moreover, many women also said that it would only happen to a woman if she invited it. These responses to violence and sexual harassment can be understood within patriarchal notions of shame and honour, which most women held on to. Admitting to being harassed seemed to them to signal that they were somehow at fault, it reflected on their conduct and questioned their own 'character'. Whereas for domestic violence, it reflected on their husband and not their own, and was considered less shameful, and even normal. Therefore, even for those women who eventually opened up and shared some of their experiences, the immediate response was immediately to shake their heads and deny that it had happened to them. However many women would come back to these issues at some point and share incidences which had happened to a 'friend', or in rare cases, to themselves. A lot of women also reported dealing harshly with men

who behaved badly, and giving them as good as they got.

#### *Old age, son preference*

The insecurity of old age and the desire for a son to look after them was clearly present. This was the case even though daughters almost completely looked after younger children and took over household work while their mothers worked and brothers were being educated at school. For all their desire for sons, most of the women were working even though they were old and unwell, and spent a lot of their energies searching for jobs for their sons. Education, marriage, health and the future of children was obviously a matter of enormous concern. A lot of the women agreed that education for children, and the prospects of jobs later on were better in the city. For girls, many mothers were preoccupied with their safety and their marriage in what they perceived as a hostile city. In quite a few of the cases, children were weak, or ill from injuries, disability or tumour. They had either been refused treatment at hospitals, or could not meet the cost of medication.

#### *The vulnerabilities of seasonal migrants*

The case of seasonal migrant construction workers was unique, and their vulnerabilities somewhat different. They were completely bound to each other as a community and to the contractor who gave them everything- jobs, wages, accommodation, daily expense money, transport. Though some of them had been coming to Delhi for years, their knowledge of the city was extremely limited.

The women particularly would be completely stranded without other women or the men who accompanied them to work. The women reported that construction labour was harsh and extremely demanding. They were physically weakened and often vomited when constructing garbage stations and public facilities. Interestingly, when asked what they found difficult about their work, a few women said they had to do *pardah* (veil themselves) before the men they worked with, this was their biggest inconvenience.

#### b. Economic vulnerabilities

##### *Extreme hardship, debt, insecurity of employment*

Poor and migrant slum dwellers lead a hand to mouth existence. Extreme financial pressures, particularly debt pushes them to working in the informal sector with no security of employment, standardised wages, or benefits and leave. Particularly factory workers, most of who were entirely dependent on the sub-contractor and whose labour was casualised. The women had a keen sense of their position in the economy, and the value of unskilled labour. They knew they could not demand higher wages or better working conditions or any form of contract, and were very aware that if they left the job in response, there were only too many others willing to take their place.

##### *Re-examining poverty*

Most women ran their households on a meagre income often not supplemented, or only poorly supplemented by their husbands. In many of the homes we observed the presence of many consumer items indicative of a modern urban lifestyle- TV's, Record Players, DVD Players, refrigerators and mobile phones. These forms of entertainment were definitely part of the attractions that the city had to offer, but they in no way took away from the debilitating burden of poverty. In fact they were testimonies to the extreme lopsidedness of the modernisation and urbanisation process. While DVDs could be purchased with ease, water, electricity, sanitation and rights as citizens still remained out of reach.

##### *Relationship with the state*

Migrants interact with the state at various levels. Despite possessing documents that gave them an identity in the city, the state did not recognise or respect their rights. Most *jhuggi* dwellers were also aware of how little they could expect in terms of a safety net from the state. The state machinery was seen to be oppressive, exploitative and a hindrance at worst, and something they could work around if possible, at its best.

East of Kailash in particular was one *basti* where it emerged clearly that this relationship was a complicated one and fraught with tension. East of

Kailash had a very strong police presence. Most vendors and shop owners had to pay a monthly sum to be allowed to do their business. Also for suspected trade in drugs like *bhaang* and *gaanja* for which this *basti* was known meant more police surveillance. Sometimes the police had to be bribed with alcohol. Bengali Muslims were picked up time and again and harassed on suspicion of being illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

The implications of this issue, which is an extremely contentious political, social and electoral one, for the lives of ordinary people was clearly in evidence when the East of Kailash slum cluster was demolished in October, 2003.

The arbitrary and callous handling of the demolition by the state revealed just how precarious the lives of migrants are. Of a cluster of 900 families, only 150 were relocated to the Madanpur Khadar area, despite many more possessing the required documents. Those left stranded after having seen their homes of 15-20 years brought down in a few hours were not even given temporary arrangements for a place to stay till they could find another. 13 people were blacklisted as being from Bangladesh despite the fact they possessed citizenship documents and proof of native village. The documents of many others, submitted for evaluation, lie pending at the Punarvasi office in I.T.O. gathering dust. Documents such as the Voter ID, ration card and election card, hitherto only a means of ensuring regular supply of rations, have now become crucial in determining who is a resident and what her entitlements are. Those who have been relocated to Khadar face an entirely new set of problems. Most have been given 12 *gaz* (square yards) of land instead of the promised 18, woefully inadequate to house their families. The area is remote, very far from places of employment, schools, health care facilities and shops. Many women have had to leave their jobs since the commute is too expensive and children don't go to school. The water was already causing stomach ailments. When we visited, the women were trying to rebuild their homes with what they had salvaged. We met Zarina, a former resident of East of Kailash and we spoke about the demolition. While she understands

that the local officials were also trying to do their job, she pointed out that "*tareeka hota hai (there is a way of doing it)- at least the officials should have given some notice*".

### Making meaning

In all cases women maintained a punishing daily routine organised around the performance of tasks- whether at home or outside. Between housework, caring for children and paid work, they barely had any time for anything else. Within this structure, spaces were still carved out for doing other things - watching TV serials was a common enough pastime. Visits to the Dargah and to Ajmer Sharif were important events. In Govindpuri women timed many of their activities to be in time for the neighbourhood *satsang*.

When asked if they were satisfied with their move to the city, and the life that they had made for themselves, the responses were mixed. Many of the women perceived the city as a hostile unsafe place, particularly for women and girls, which had treated them badly in exchange for all the labour that they had given it. It was after coming to the city that many of their husbands had taken to alcoholism, the city had also cost many of them their traditional crafts and livelihoods. The younger generation particularly, identified much more with city life than with the village.

On the other hand there was a clear recognition of what the city had to offer. Opportunities for employment, to earn, to provide their children with an education and a 'better' future, as opposed to the village they had left in desperate situations. It offered many women some freedom from some of the traditional mores of their villages, though this was accompanied by innumerable difficulties.

For most women, going back to their villages was a remote or nonexistent possibility. Delhi was their home, for better or worse. Most admitted that opportunities for earning and survival were better here, but many were bitter about how they had fared in the city. As one of them says, "*We have given so much to the Rajdhani... What have we got from the capital in return?*"

# WOMEN AT WORK: RIGHTS AND VULNERABILITIES

5

One thing that emerges clearly is that many women have come to the city in search of a livelihood for themselves. Although many of them did migrate with their families, it is they who became the primary bread earners over time. The changing scenario of the rural economy in the backdrop of privatisation and liberalisation has led to mass-scale unemployment in the rural areas. The loss of small-scale industries and the closing down of economic units has forced people to leave the village for the city. There is a hope that in the city they will at least be able to earn enough to sustain their families. The cities, at the same time, have seen a different kind of change. With greater education for the women and rise in the buying capacity of the middle class, the demand for the work of domestic care has increased. More women are coming out of their homes to earn, however the responsibility of child-care and housework remains theirs too. This creates a need to employ others to take on these responsibilities of house-work and child and elderly care. Thus, the factors that push women out of the villages are complemented by demand factors in the city that pulls them. The result is that there is a huge workforce of women in the city of Delhi, primarily in the unorganised sector.

## The Unorganised Sector

All the women in our sample were located in the unorganised sector. Characteristically, there is no written contract that enumerates the benefits and the conditions of work for women. There is no concept of a minimum wage, no redressal mechanism and no monitoring body. The working conditions are often poor and the only recourse to any violations is to leave the job.

Our field-work experience suggests that the factory, which is traditionally understood as a private-sector undertaking, is also slowly being converted into an unorganised sector work-setting. Such change should also be explained taking into account the policies of liberalisation and privatisation, which have entailed new work practices including outsourcing, flexible work and other such practices which further informalise their work. Increasingly, in factories, less workers are employed on a regular basis and more are taken on a contract. A large portion of the work in the factory is also being distributed to the small, home-based kind of settings. Such home-based work is usually very poorly paid.

The desperation to earn their livelihood somehow makes the women even more vulnerable to all kinds of violence at the workplace. These include theft accusations, non-payment of wages, bribery, and sexual and physical harassment. The employers and others who are in the position of power take advantage of such vulnerability of the women working in the unorganised sector.

## The City and Work: Some Common Concerns

The following are some of the common concerns that emerged from the interviews with the women:

*Opportunities for Earning.* Working in the city and earning their livelihood has various meanings for the migrant women. It means having an opportunity to earn on their own, in stark contrast to their life in the village. It also offers an opportunity to make new working relationships with the employer, factory owner, contractor and so on. Despite their vulnerability in such power relations, these people are the ones to whom

women turn to in times of need. There are hardly any other support structures available to them.

Apart from providing a source of income for women in general, the city also provides opportunity for the single women, who would otherwise live without any earning in the village and in the absence of a male member to look after them.

In addition to this, the city provides opportunities for the women to engage in multiple occupations.

*The Triple Burden:* Although most women migrate with their families and husbands, in due course of time they often become the primary earners of the family. For the women, it means that over time, they are the ones who become responsible for everything- the children, the house and the work as well. While earning on their own may make the women more independent and empowered, at the same time, it puts this triple burden on them. This is to emphasize the fact that although more number of women have come out of their homes to work, there has not been a similar, or even comparable, increase in the men's responsibility at home. The workload of the women thereby has tremendously increased. Their life is a continuous drag of work from morning to night, often without even a second's rest. In addition to this, some women also express that their coming out of homes sometimes makes the men in the families become even more violent and possessive. The result is domestic violence, regular abuse and accusations of infidelity. Thus, life at the same time becomes more difficult.

*The Demon of Demolition:* Most of the migrants live in illegal colonies that are in constant threat of demolition. Such demolition often happens without a sufficient legal notice period. A constant threat in the minds of women who are staying in migrant colonies is the threat of demolition. The fact that their homes could be broken down any day lurks in their minds all the time and gives a sense of uncertainty to their lives. For them it means searching for a new place to live in, loss of livelihood and losing everything that they may have invested in building their homes. Often, they

are relocated to new areas, which are situated in the outskirts of the city. That means that they have to now travel much longer distances for work. The amount of money and time spent on the travel is huge making the occupation itself absolutely non-viable for them. The result is loss of work for a large number of migrant men and women.

*Harassment:* The responses revealed a tremendous taboo around the issue of sexual harassment. For most of the women on being asked about their experiences of harassment, their first reaction was strong denial. They denied having ever heard of or experienced it. We noted that the women talked more freely about domestic violence, as compared to sexual violence. But still, some of them did share about their experiences of having faced such harassment. They talked about harassment by the people, police and their employers and even relatives. The need for work to sustain themselves makes them especially vulnerable to harassment which could be varied in its forms and intensity. It could be non-payment of wages, maltreatment or verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

### Types of Work

The migrant women in our study are employed in various types of work. The largest percentage of women whom we interviewed work as domestic workers. They do tasks such as washing dishes, clothes, cleaning, mopping, and sometimes cooking for other households. These women fulfill the growing demand for domestic workers in the city.

A considerable number of women are also working in the factories in Gurgaon, Govindpuri and Faridabad. A factory, as mentioned earlier, is traditionally understood as a private sector undertaking that is guided by the rules and regulations of private enterprises. But, most of the women whom we interviewed worked in these factories on a contract basis. The contract usually is from anywhere between 10 days to four months. A large number of women also work from home doing textile-related work like piece cutting, stitching sequins and beads on the cloth, and making drawstrings.

Apart from this, there are a large number of seasonal migrants who come to the city every year to work at the construction sites. They leave their family and home behind and often move with friends and relatives from the same village. More often than not, they come to work for the same contractor.

Finally, some women are also categorized as self-employed. They are petty shop owners, tailors, vegetable and fruit sellers and so on.

The economic and civic issues that face all the women, no matter what kind of work they are engaged in, are the same. All of them are working extremely hard to eke out a living for themselves and are vulnerable to various kinds of harassment.

### Domestic Work

*The Rising Demand:* Domestic work is taken up by a large number of women who are living in migrant colonies in Delhi. This is a low-skill job in which women do not have to have particular skills. The work that they do as a domestic worker is 'gendered', it is something that they have been doing as women all their lives- washing, cleaning, cooking and other traditionally female household work. There is more demand to employ women to do household work as they are seen to be less demanding, less likely to protest in cases of theft accusations and other kinds of harassment and most importantly due to the fact that domestic work is understood as 'women's work'.

*The Informal Network of Information:* For most women, the network that they use for getting the information about the availability of work in any household is informal. It is usually a neighbour who is also doing the same job who tells other women about the work that is available in a particular house. But, we have come across some rare cases in which women have gone on their own to look for job and have got it.

*The Work:* The women who were interviewed during this research are part-time workers. The work is part-time in the sense that they do not live with the employer. On an average, one woman

works in about four to five houses and she has to do two shifts. Often they have to leave home at about seven in the morning and it is only by late in the afternoon that they come back after finishing one shift. They just have the time to finish their lunch and get a little rest, then it is time again to leave for work for the second shift. Most of the women have to cook after they come home and then feed the children and then eat. If there is an older daughter or a mother-in-law at home, then they get some support for their household chores, otherwise the entire burden falls on them. In the words of a woman from East of Kailash,

*"I get up at six in the morning. After my morning chores I clean the house, wash the utensils of the past night make breakfast for everyone and most of the time leave for work without eating anything. After coming back from the work at around 1:00, I have to prepare the lunch and wash clothes. Again I leave for work at four in the evening and then come back not before 7 p.m. After making dinner and having it I go to sleep around eleven."*

*The Pros and Cons:* Despite the continuous hardships and monotony of the job, many women find it preferable to work as a domestic help. Many of them say that it is because they are able to come home during the day to take care of their young children. At the same time, domestic work does not involve much commuting. Often, only those women are employed who stay close to the employer's place of residence. This gives them the freedom to call her whenever they want, sometimes earlier and sometimes a little later than the scheduled time. Even the women do not have to travel much and spend money in commuting from one place to the other. In most cases, women are able to walk down to their places of work.

*Benefits, however discretionary:* In working as a domestic help, women often make several new relationships with the various members in the households. It is these people, who often support the woman with money, food, medical assistance, old clothes and so on. However such benefits are completely at the discretion of the employer. There are homes in which no such benefits are offered. We observed that the women took a lot of pride in

not even asking for a cup of tea or any other benefits. If given, they will accept, but they will not ask for anything on their own accord. This is the only kind of employment in which the women get some benefits, howsoever discretionary. They are given old clothes, holidays, medicines, and sometimes even money from the employers in whose house they work, particularly in the case of any social event such as marriage. There are cases in which the employer has helped the women in handling domestic violence from the husband. The following are the words of a woman who worked as a domestic worker in East of Kailash about the benefits that she received:

*"I got a lot of benefits. They would give me meals, clothes and blankets – everything, from there. They supported me whenever my husband would ill treat me or beat me. They got my daughter admission in a school and also gave her bag, notebooks etc. They would tell me that they would deduct my wages for the number of days that I took leave, but they never did. They only wanted me to let them know in advance whenever I wanted to take leave. But this made them prepare for arranging for alternatives."*

Another woman from the same area went to Saudi Arabia for work. She shares her experience:

*"I was treated very well there. I used to get food, good money and medical facilities. Once when I was washing heavy carpets, my earlier stitches opened up and I was in terrible condition. This happened about 6-7 months after I had got myself operated. When I had the above mentioned health problem, I wanted to come back to India. They gave me a watch, golden earrings, one chain when I was leaving and also helped me in coming back to India by taking care of the travel expenses."*

Another domestic worker from the area shares her problems at work: *"My employers, kothiwalis do not give me any food except for maybe a piece of bread and tea sometimes in the morning. No I cannot ask. That is bad manners. My salary gets reduced for those days on which I take leave. When my younger daughter was born, I went on leave and my brother-in-law filled my place during*

*my absence. If we are absent for more than two days, salary gets deducted. I do not get anything much, except for old clothes and some sweets and Rs. 20/-. Whenever anything is lost in the house, the blame is put on me. Once a necklace was lost which was ultimately found in the same house. I did not go to work for two days, till it had been found lest they blame me for planting it there. The employers came to seek forgiveness. Instead they give me stale food. If I refuse to take it, they feel insulted. I work on one cup of tea practically throughout the morning. If I answer them back, madam says leave work."*

*Vulnerabilities:* Although preferred by many, domestic work has its own set of vulnerabilities. Many women complain of continuous bickering by the employers, more often, by the lady of the house. Apart from this, they have to face theft accusations from the employers. It is evident from few interviews that often, these accusations would only be an excuse to make the worker leave the house. There are also cases in which the woman was harassed by male members of the household and by the other male servants in the house. Since in the beginning, the workplace is new and unknown, and is within the closed, private domain of the household, the woman is vulnerable to sexual and physical harassment. When they complain they are not believed. The only recourse in case of facing such violations and theft accusations is to leave the house. There is absolutely no redressal mechanism that the woman can go to, when faced with such circumstances. A woman from Hanuman Camp shares her experiences in the following words:

*".....then I joined another house where I would clean utensils. Phir mujhe us sahab ka niyat kharab laga (then I suspected the intentions of the employer). When madam would be out of the house sahab would come to the kitchen when I am washing utensils. He would ask me to light a cigarette for him. My hands would be wet at that time washing so how does he expect me to light one? And one day he said his wife is out and asked me to sit beside him and told me to demand whatever I want, he'll give me everything. I told him, I'll leave this house if you talk to me like this*



*and I left the work next day itself. But I told his wife that her husband's intentions are not good at all. We come from such a distance to work here and your husband misbehaves. She got angry and defended her husband. After 2 days they cleared my money."*

## Factory Work

*The Contract System and the Contractor.* The women working in factories state that there is hardly anyone who is employed in the factories these days for long-term employment. Most of the contracts are extremely short-term, no-benefit contracts, which are often as short as two to five days. The contract system works against the employee although it is done at the pretext of providing "greater flexibility". The contract system has made the availability of the factory work erratic and women are unable to get other regular employment, in the hope that there would be more work from the factory. They also need to maintain a good rapport with the contractor who takes decisions on whom to hire. Although mostly informal, some appointments are made through notices that are put outside the factories for specific requirements.

Another problem that the women who work in the factory face is the problem of late payment of wages by the contractor. The factory employer pays the contractor on a monthly basis. Thus, he or she is able to pay to the worker, only on a monthly basis. So even if a worker works for five days in the beginning of the month, she would get the money only after the month gets over. Even for this much, she has to be constantly after the contractor for her money.

*Uncertain Job Availability.* There is no mechanism of knowing when contracts will be given out and how many women will be hired as it is completely *ad hoc* and at the discretion of the owner and contractors.

*The Pros and Cons.* One of the biggest problems with factory work is the extremely long hours that the women have to spend at work. Often, there are

night shifts and overtime that the women have to do. The children are left alone and unattended for this long stretch of time. As a result, the education and the care of the children suffer drastically. More often than not, they do not go to the schools regularly, or have already dropped out. Sometimes, the women in the factory are also vulnerable to being exploited by the staff. Some older women indicated during the interviews that it is often the young women who are employed more willingly in the factories.

*The Vulnerabilities.* The conditions in which these women work in the factories are also not very healthy. Often, a factory is made in a small warehouse kind of a structure, which is insufficient in light and ventilation. The health condition of the women often suffers because of such conditions.

An important factor that affects the women working in the factory most drastically stems from much larger environmental issues like VAT or pollution. For example, according to a Supreme Court Ruling, all the factories had to be relocated to the outskirts of the city. For the women and their husbands, continuing to work in the same factories meant spending at least Rs. 30 daily in travelling to the new place of work and coming back from there. For some of the lucky ones, a bus is sent from the factory, otherwise, they have to spend this much money. Often, this becomes the reason for which women leave their work. Similarly, demolition also affects the women working in the factory very badly. When they are provided plots that are located at the extreme outskirts of the city, it becomes very difficult for the women to continue going to the same factory. At the new place where they have shifted, there are usually no factories because it is a less-developed area. In the words given below, a factory worker from Govindpuri shares her thoughts:

*"You can never trust factory work, it is there today, not tomorrow... There is a lot of insecurity and tension in life and we have no clue about our future here.*

*Maine apna majboori mein kaam karna shuru kiya. We were left with no money and no other*

*options... So I put on my purdah and started going out for work. We did not have anything at home so our neighbors called me and asked me to go with them for work. My husband was not very happy but he had no option so he agreed. Double work is not easy. But we share whatever money we get and there are no fights at home about this. There are many days when we don't get work. These days we get Rs.50 per day. There is nothing done in paper in our work, only your name will be written in their papers and the work you have done. We work from 9 to 6 in the factory. There is 15 minutes lunch break. No tea breaks. I do cloth-work. The room is OK. It has lights. The factory is located in Okhla. Sometimes I have problems with my eyes and I do get back pains. We get paid only for the days we work."*

### Self-employment

*Some Autonomy.* The self-employed women are the ones who are petty-shop owners, vegetable sellers, junk-dealers and so on. Many women use self-employment as a way to complement their income, thereby engaging in multiple occupations. Self-employment gives the women some kind of autonomy over their work life. For example, in times of illness, she can choose not to work, as the control of the shop lies in her hands. Fulfilling the responsibilities of housework and childcare at the same time (as, say, running a tea shop) can be extremely demanding and leaves the woman with absolutely no rest.

*Getting Money Everyday.* The biggest advantage cited by the self-employed women is that of getting money on a daily basis. It is also essential because it is this money itself that the woman has to use for buying the goods for her shop to sell on the next day. Thus, it is important that she sells a large portion of what she has bought on the same day.

*Vulnerabilities.* One of the vulnerabilities that the self-employed women, especially those who have shops on the road face is that of continuous police and public harassment. Often they have to bribe the police for the license of the shop. It was mentioned by one woman that one policeman was

from her own village, so he did not accept any money from her. And when the person was transferred and another policeman was made in-charge of the area, she had to resume paying the bribe. Women street vendors also face a considerable extent of public harassment. When they go to the wholesale market to buy material, and, even on the road, they face the taunting of the public. Often, their own relatives living in the same colony also taunt and call names. There is a typical problem with the Bangladeshi migrant women. From the areas where the number of such migrants was considerably large, the police often rounded them up, and released them only on the payment of some money. Being Bangladeshi was an excuse that was used by the policemen to get illegal money from the women.

Self-employed women, especially the junk-dealers were often accused of being involved in thefts. The police often raided their shops looking for stolen goods.

In addition to this, the women who are self-employed are on the job for very long hours leaving them with no time for rest or leisure.

### Home-based Work

There are many women who are employed in home-based work, especially in the textile industry. The work is generally that of piece cutting, making of drawstrings, embroidering or sorting beads and sequins, and so on. A large number of these women also work in the factory, whenever it is available. At other time, they work from home. Even the availability of the home-based work is extremely erratic, due to a large number of factories closing down, and getting privatised. The wages that the women receive are pathetically low and are often based on the number of pieces (eg. of drawstrings) completed- from the lowest being 50 paise per piece to around Rs. 7-10 per piece being the maximum. Home-based work is almost always available through the contractors, who take a commission from the factory (or someone subcontracted by the factory) for each person they get to do the work.

*Vulnerabilities:* Various health problems are associated with home-based textile related work. The primary ones are backache and eyesight related problems since it is continuous work that strains the eyes and one has to remain bent for a considerable period of time. Women have to cope with such occupational hazards without being taken care of at all, or any responsibility of the factory or the contractor for whom they work. Like the self-employed women, these women who do home-based work also have to be on the job for long hours. This increases their vulnerability towards health hazards.

## Construction Work

*Seasonal and Temporary Construction Workers:* Most of the construction workers whom we interviewed were seasonal migrants. They migrate to the city for a certain period of time and then go back to the village. There are other women who do construction work at some times and stay in the city throughout the year. The experiences of working are extremely different for the seasonal and the permanent migrants.

*The Contractor:* This work is available either through a contractor or from the *chowk*. *Chowk* is a market place, or busy cross-road or intersection where daily wage labourers go and offer their services. Both the employers and the contractors visit the *chowk* at a designated time (usually early morning) and take workers on a daily wage basis. During our interviews, we found that women hardly go to the *chowk* to find work. There are a large number of men who can be seen crowding the *chowks* early in the mornings. One possible explanation could be the fear of harassment at the public places and the feeling of insecurity standing at such a place. Seasonal migrants generally have some land in the village and they come to the city at a time when their agricultural labour is not required in the fields. They work for about four to six months, save some money either to get their daughters married off, or to pay off a certain debt, and go back. They often come with one particular contractor who provides them with a place to stay, and pays for their other housing expenses.

*Vulnerabilities:* The construction workers have to work in terribly difficult conditions in which they are completely exposed to the extremities of weather. The children have to be left behind in the villages, and it is often the eldest daughter of the home who has to take care of her other siblings. At the same time, the migrant workers who are engaged in the construction work are totally dependent on the contractor with whom they come to the city. This makes them vulnerable to any kind of violence that could be inflicted on them. The following are the words of a migrant construction worker from Dakshinpuri that describe the problems that they face at work:

*"The work is very strenuous. We often lift loads of 100 kg. Our hands and feet start paining. We do mostly government work- building roads, public utilities, toilets, garbage pits etc. The stench is terrible. We often vomit. We work the whole day. The shift begins at about 9 a.m. and finishes at about 5 p.m. We get an hour's break for lunch, that's all. Often we have to work after 5 p.m. Sometimes we work all night...till 5 a.m. the next day. We don't get any rest. We get overtime after 5 p.m. depending on how long after that we have to work. Night shift may cost the contractor 135 Rs. The munshi pays us Rs. 65 for a day's labour. Every week we get about Rs, 200 per labourer for rations, living expenses etc. We collect our total dues when we leave for the village. No, we don't get leave. The munshi informs us a day in advance when there is work and a tempo comes to collect us in the morning. No we aren't given any food or water. We pack our own food and take to the site. We aren't given any water. We ask the people nearby or find a tap to drink from. No, we have to manage on our own. We either go to work in a tempo which comes to collect us or go to work in a bus. The Munshi pays for our travel. We go to work in all kinds of places. Nizamuddin, Kotla, Okhla, Old Delhi. It takes an hour or two coming back in the evening...depending on where we go to work. We work as long as it takes to finish the job. We don't decide where we go or the kind of work. We just go where we are told."*

## STORIES OF MOVEMENT: SOME CASE STUDIES

# 6

### Life of a Factory Worker: Mala's Story

Mala is a 50-year old woman, with three grown-up sons who is now separated from her husband. She came to Delhi with her husband from Moradabad. Mala works in a garment factory, doing measurement work. All her sons are educated – two are working (one as a conductor and the other, an electrician in a factory), and the third is still studying.

"I came to Delhi 10 years ago. All three boys were born in the village. I had the operation and then I came here. I have not really left the village behind, as such. I still have associations there. I returned just about a month back.

We didn't take a loan to come here but we sold our buffalo. My *nandoi* (sister-in-law's husband) worked in a TV factory. We already had people from the family and the village here. They said to us that you are educated. Everyone goes to Delhi to make a living. So my husband and I decided to come here to give our children a better life. Everyone wants to give their children the best.

When we first came here, we stayed with the kids along with my *nandoi*. We brought no belongings. Only Rs. 2000–3000. We then kept our luggage with a person from the village and then looked for a room. Initially we stayed in Govindpuri. In no.1 *gali* (lane), no.2 – actually in all the *galis* from no.1 to 16! We stayed in rented rooms in all the *galis*. We had to change houses many times. Many times. We stayed for one month, 4 months, 2 months. We stayed for one and a half years in 2 houses.

We keep going back to the village. This time I stayed there for a month as I hurt my foot. I was from a town in any case. I went to the village only after my marriage. I did not like the life in the village. We did *kheti* in the village. It was a lot of work. *Hal lana, saath chalana, gai bhes ka chara lana* (ploughing, herding animals and so on). I had to do everything in the home also. *Saas chakki piswati thi* (My mother-in-law used to make me grind wheat). I had never done this kind of work. One has to work everywhere, in the village and the city. But I did not like the behaviour of the family there.

Still, even then, I was not happy coming to the city, I had to come for the sake of the children. What can we do in 2 *beeghas* of land? But I thought, if I come here my children will learn more. They will see more and see different things than in the village. Everyone wants a better life. Nothing special about me.

Initially my husband was a security guard in one factory. The vacancies are put up on the board and he got it. When I first came here, I worked in a TV connector factory. I did the work of an electrician, only ladies and girls worked there. Wires were cut for TV. Switches were also made. It was work for a party from Jullundar. But the factory closed. I thought that here also we would be hungry. Then one Punjabi girl told me about this fabrication work. I went with her. I used to be scared about factory kind of work as the doors were closed and I used to wonder *bund karke kya karte hain* (what do they do behind closed doors?!). When they came out I asked them about what happened inside – they said that we are interviewed. Initially I did not know and was scared. Not anymore.

I was scared till I did not know about the work. That girl taught me everything. Chest, armhole, shoulder... I knew it as *chati, modha*, I did not know how to say pocket.

See, this is how it happens...we find out information about factories from each other. Other men and women from the camp go to find out and tell each other. We get to know from the notices on the board. Nowadays things have changed a lot. There are only a few 'Limited companies' left who give the bonus and PF. But companies change their names after three years and use other means, so that they don't have to give workers any benefits. Exporters give the factory owners a *chalan* (order slip), make a *chalan* book and a receipt book. According to the type of work required, they get the machines. The person who employs the *karigar* (worker/ artisan) pays for the machines. They are paid for the fabrication.

Now there is a rule that factories cannot be located in Delhi. All factories have been shifted outside Delhi – *side kar di*. (They have been pushed to the side.) Now there is no profit for fabrication. Exporters directly install machines in-house. 50-100 machines, and they don't need to send their work out like before. They prepare the shipment in-house now. They have got people for thread work, button, checking, press, final checking.

People work through *thekedars* (contractors). Now there are no permanent workers in the factories. We fill a form with name and address. It is written that the employers can remove the employee whenever they want. We have to sign, we have no choice but to work. To get some money at least. *Mazboori hai. Bahut hai kam par lagne wale. Ghar me bhuke bachhe hai.* (There are many people waiting to replace you. There are mouths to feed at home.) We have to work. Since the last 2 years or so I got work for 5 days or less than that. There are times when there is no work even for one or one and a half months.

Many women bring work home as men do not like their women to work outside the house. They earn Rs.10-20. They are able to buy their vegetables with that money. We earn Rs.60-70 a day. We

have to be there by 9 am. No stool to sit on for the whole day, also for my work. Half an hour lunch. You can do what you want – sit, stand, eat, talk. We work till 6 pm.

It's a flat of 200-250 square yards where 100-150-200 people. No *chai pani*. One or two hours overtime is usual. We get Sundays off. Four Sundays. If they call you then you get overtime. At the time of joining you are told that you will get Sundays off. Then Jan. 26, August 15 and October 2 are holidays. But sometimes they ask us to work and put a lock outside (to show to the world that they are closed).

If you are absent, they say *hisab karo aur jayo*. (Settle the accounts and leave.)

If you need a holiday, you have to tell beforehand. But if you want more days off, they ask you to leave. I asked for leave when my son was sick. They gave me leave for 15 days. Then they asked me to leave. It was a limited company. But still they asked me to leave. I had so many problems then – some from the home because my son was sick and some from outside as I lost my job.

(On sexual harassment) Many employers talk very badly. They give *galis* (abusive language). They are scared to say anything to me because they feel that I will beat them up. But, it depends on the type of the girl. *Ladki set ho jate hain*. (Some girls get used to it and fall in line.) Girls from Faridabad come here to work, but go out with any men for Rs. 50. Factory workers, those who employ us, when they can get girls like that – they would employ them and not women like us who can beat them up, no?

Complaining to the employers is a waste of time. No one would own up to having said something. They will try to touch you. Or bang into you (*sharir bhidae ga*). He would not do anything more. That he will try only if you give them a chance to do something. They try with all women when we go for jobs. They say that we will give you the job if you do our work ('*hamara kaam karoge...*'). But I have seen life. I say that *lagwa do* (put me on the job, ok) but if they ask me I will beat them with my shoe (*ek joota marenge*). So far I have not gone

on the wrong path and God will see that it does not happen in the future also.

(On domestic violence)...Not all men beat their wives but my husband was not comfortable with a wife who was more educated than him. In my case, the husband is *gavar* (illiterate) and had an educated wife. He could only beat me up as he could not talk to me. In the villages, women look after the house and the family. They don't go out. The husband should earn for his family and educate the children. But that was not my case, he was not interested in educating the children well – he never bought anything for me, no clothes, nothing, he never even saw what I was wearing. He never asked or looked after us. And I was not a village girl – I had lived in Najibabad. An educated person was stuck with an uneducated one. He was not educated at all. He used to scream at me that you don't know any village work, any housework. He would return from the fields and scream at me or beat me. He would return from the jungle and beat me. That is why I came here – earn for myself and educate my boys.

There can be no comparison between the education available here and in the village. If I wouldn't have come to Delhi, my sons would have been nothing. Although I have paid for their education, their future is uncertain because of the times now. Unemployment is high – people are removed from jobs easily. I am also scared that my house will be broken down during demolition. Now it will take me so much time to make a new place. I want a 'regular' job even if the money is less. See, even my son did BA, ITI but he gets only Rs.1800. Now the factories will have no work till Diwali. They don't give us anything now. Earlier we got sweets, bonus, gift. Earlier it was like a permanent job.

Now, there are contractors everywhere. Even electricity supply in Delhi works with contractors now. Earlier if they paid Rs.3000 for a job, they now pay Rs.1000 for the same work. The public has increased and the jobs have reduced. People come to the city for a while and return back to the village. They take a room on rent. 4-5 of them stay together and go back to the village for the harvest

and return after few months. But we have given so much to the *rajdhani* (capital). What have we got in return?"

### A Seasonal Migrant: Pinky's Story

Pinky is a construction worker from Bhimrao Camp in Dakshinpuri. She hails from Jhansi and came to Delhi 2-2 ½ years with her husband. She is a seasonal migrant who does construction work along with other members of her community in Delhi. She is part of a community of the Dhobi caste in the district of Jhansi which migrates to Delhi every year, stays for about 8-10 months and then goes back to the village for the harvest season. Pinky has two sons who study in the village and are living with her mother-in-law.

"A *munshi* from our district has been recruiting us for almost 20 years now. He is the one who sends word to the villages that more labour is required, and the news spreads through word of mouth and people come, with others- acquaintances, relatives and spouses. He arranges work for us in the city. We only work for him, no one else. He also provides for our shelter and negotiates our wages with the builder.

My husband left for Delhi about 6-7 years after marriage. I followed about two years later. The crops were all rotting because of too much rain...last year there was a drought and again...people were fleeing from the village to the city. This time I had to book my ticket four times before I could get on the train. Still, I had to keep sitting throughout the night...squeezed between hundreds of people. I carried two bags of *gehun* (wheat) with me.

My husband and I used to do farming in the village. We have a bit of land that was divided among my husband's three other brothers. We also used to work on some other people's lands. With four others to feed, it was difficult for us to manage.

When I first came to the city, in the beginning I was too scared of crossing the road alone. There are too many vehicles in the city! We have usually lived at this place only (Dakshinpuri) in Delhi. The

*munshi* makes all the arrangements for housing. Otherwise there is no way for us to manage... I don't know anyone in this city. Though I have stayed in other places than Dakshinpuri. The *munshi* doesn't charge us any rent.

Do I like my work? Well, there is no other choice. Construction work is the only kind of work left open to seasonal migrants like us. I keep going back to the village, and don't stay here permanently because I miss my children.

It is out of compulsion that we come to the city. There is no money in the village. There is severe scarcity of water in the city. In my village there are wells and streams. In the city there is a lot of shortage. I have to borrow water from the colony nearby. Often I have to make do with just one bucket or so a day. I had fallen ill with typhoid recently, but I got myself treated in the village only.

I cannot bring the children here because then there would be no one to look after them. We go to work all day. Who will pick them up from school? Who can we trust them with in this city? Yes the education is better here but...

The extremes of the weather makes us suffer a lot. The contractor is a good man and never cheats the workers. If he tries to cheat us, it is his loss because then he won't get any labour. I take off from work only when I am ill. Usually I get up in the morning, make *chai-paani* and go to work. After a whole day we return at about 6 pm. I feel very tired on returning. Then I clean the house and cook. At night often everyone just gathers around here and sits.

I have just returned from the village. I had gone for about fifteen days to rest, as I was very ill before going. My husband was not there so I had to come back with someone else. How can I travel alone? I will get lost. There is always someone from the village. Otherwise we go once in 6-8 months. We will go next *chait ke mahine mein*.

It was my husband's decision that I come to the city and work with him. This was because the

contractor had told us that another person is needed. Money was needed at home. My mother-in-law did not want me to go. The idea of working outside the home is scary. We have to travel long distances to work and I am scared that I will lose my way back. I make sure I always have someone to travel with.

We have seen so many people leave for the city from our villages to do construction. No, I will not do things like domestic work. To do domestic work we would have to go alone. Climb up steep stairs....go into someone's house without knowing them. Moreover, in the village we clean the floor with *gobar* (cowdung)! How will we know how to do cleaning in city houses! We only do work where we have familiar people around us all the time.

Of course, the work is very strenuous. We often lift loads of 100 kg. *Haath pair bahut dard karte hain*. (Our hands and feet ache a lot.) I am mostly involved in public related construction work - building roads, public utilities, toilets, garbage pits etc. The stench is terrible. Sometimes we have to vomit because of the stench of garbage...

We have to work the whole day. The shift begins at about 9 a.m. and finishes at about 5 p.m. One hour's lunch break, that's all. Often we have to work after 5 p.m. sometimes all night....till 5 a.m. the next day. No rest. We get overtime after 5 p.m. Depending on how long after that we have to work. Night shift may cost the contractor Rs.135.

The *munshi* pays Rs.65 for a day's labour. Every week we get about Rs.200 per labourer for rations, living expenses etc. We collect our total dues when we leave for the village.

Generally we do not get any leave. The *munshi* informs us a day in advance when there is work and a tempo comes to collect us in the morning. He pays for this. We do not get any food or water - food, we pack our own and take to the site. We have to ask the people nearby for drinking water. Or else find a tap to drink from.

We go to work in all kinds of places. Nizamuddin, Kotla, Okhla, Old Delhi. It takes an hour or two

coming back in the evening...depending on where we have to go to work. We just go where we are told.

My husband does not drink. Only once in a while. (On violence) Since I don't make any mistakes, why should he hit me? It is but natural for him to hit me when I do something to make him angry. Man is bigger no? So he can only hit. But my husband rarely hits me.

(On sexual harassment in public places) Yes, there is a lot of pushing and shoving in the bus. But we don't take any nonsense. I just show anyone who tries anything my slipper. Yes, there is a lot of misbehaviour, particularly while getting into the bus and getting off. As a safety measure, we always travel in groups. Usually there are always men with us. When the men are there, we have to do *purda'* before them. That is an inconvenience while working. But it has to be done.

I don't want to bring my children in the city. I don't know the city well. We will keep coming to the city the time health permits. Then I will return to the village for good."

#### *Ghunghat* to Entrepreneurship: Shashi's story

Shashi is a 45-year-old woman who migrated to Delhi from Madhya Pradesh. She now lives with her husband, and five children, of which four are girls and one boy who she adopted recently. Shashi also has a married daughter living in the village, who is now visiting her as she has just had her first child. Her husband is a *jyotish* (astrologer) and practices his traditional occupation, and "does not earn much". He is also a TB patient and an alcoholic for several years. She is self-employed and works as a petty vendor selling fruits and other snacks in the morning and afternoon, and savouries and pickles in the evening, and has supported her family on her own. She is usually found sitting on the *charpoy* on the main road near her *jhuggi* where she sells *papad*, *namkeen*, *achar*, *mungfalli* – all from her village in MP – Khandwa.

"I moved to the city along with several members of my family around 25 years ago. Khandwa in MP is

my natal home and Harda is my marital village. We moved with several other members (around 10-15) of my natal family and my husband. We left Khandwa but spent several years in different towns and cities before we reached Delhi. En route we spent time in places like Bhopal, Itarsi, Jhansi... Mathura was the last stop before we came to Delhi. In each place we set up a sort of camp and all stayed there. Since our traditional occupation is *jyotishi*, we could carry out our work in the towns where we stopped and were able to earn our living for a while. It is not clear how many years we spent like this, maybe around 3-5 years. After this we came to Delhi where we have been for the past almost 25 years. We already had relatives here, and moved directly into the Govindpuri *basti* area. So there was already family support as my *mama* (maternal uncle) lived here. Initially I did feel a bit nervous in the city - *aadat nahi thi* (I wasn't used to it). I began working outside the home within a month or two of arriving in the city.

We came because of economic reasons. We did not have land in the village –we are *jyotishi* there also, though we also did *kheti* as agricultural labourers. But I did not work outside the home in the village. There people would speak badly, if we moved and worked outside the home – '*kaise bahu hai*' (what kind of a daughter-in-law is she?!) they would say! We had to veil ourselves, and cover our faces (*ghunghat*) and could not walk around freely like we do here in the city. My natal family was much better than my marital family. After marriage, they expected me to live in a *dharamshala* (lodge). My parents said, "you cannot expect our daughter to live in a *dharamshala*" so we took a separate place for Rs. 15 per month. In the village, at that time there was no electricity even.

My mother still lives in the village and sends *papad*, *namkeen*, *achar* (savouries and pickles) etc. for selling here. My in-laws are also still in the village and my sister-in-law, who has two children. Her husband has left her to live with another woman here in Delhi. I go to the village around 4-5 times a year, mainly to collect the *papad* etc for selling. I stop to visit my in-laws on the way. And nowadays, my daughter lives in the village. So I visit her also. But I do not go for long visits- just



enough to pick up the things. How will my family manage without me? My maternal family also supports me by sending *gehu* (wheat, which is the staple food) and other items from the village.

When I first came I did *beldari* (labour at a construction site) work for a couple of years. I began working on the *nalla* (open drain) just near the *jhuggi*. My friend and neighbour Shabbo introduced me to this work. The *malik* (contractor) for whom I worked was known to Shabbo. I worked in several sites, including the building near Savitri cinema. This was difficult work – we had to go far away and had to work at night often. I used to earn Rs. 15 per day.

I used to pass Lajpat Nagar and Okhla every day, and came up with the idea of selling vegetables. For a while I also used to sell *bhutta* (corn) which I got from Daryaganj. Then I took a loan and got a cart. I used to buy fruits, from Okhla earlier and now Lajpat Nagar, which I brought back to Govind Puri and sold in a *thela* (cart) near my *jhuggi*.

I wake up in the morning at around 5 am and first go to the nearby tap to fill drinking water. Then I get milk and go to the toilet at a nearby *Sulabh Sauchalya* (privately owned public toilet system) where I pay 50 paise. Then at 8-9 o'clock the tanker comes for water, from which we have to fill water for the day. After this I go to get fruits for my *thela* and return by 11 am and then sit with the *thela* in the nearby lane. My ten-year-old daughter prepares the morning meal and brings it to me at the *thela*, which is nearby. I sit with the *thela* till 2-3 in the afternoon. After this I fry the *papad* for selling and then sit on the *charpoy* (cot) on the road and sells this along with *namkeen*, *mungfalli* and other stuff that I get from the village. In the evening I return home around 9 pm and then cook for dinner. Sometimes my daughter helps me and nowadays since another daughter is at home for her delivery, she sometimes makes the dinner. After dinner, I spend some time watching TV – sometimes I catch a movie and may watch till it finishes, even if it is late.

On a few occasions, I have had to face police harassment. They asked me to move my cart from the roadside. But I told them that if I go back away from the roadside, nobody would buy from me – and I needed the money as I have seven daughters and a sick husband. After that nobody troubled me. They did not even ask for money.

I have seven daughters and one son who we adopted because we wanted a son. I adopted my husband's elder brother's grandson. It is only my misfortune to have married a man who is sick and an alcoholic. There are times when my husband is utterly drunk, and says lot of abuses. There are times when he wants to beat me. He also beats the girls when they try to stop him from beating me. There are times when he does beat me. And no one interferes, because it is between the husband and the wife.

I do not think that it would have been any better in the village. Even there, interfering in private matters is not considered a wise thing to do. My only regret is that I didn't have a son. I feel that I have done the best I could with a drunkard husband and all daughters. Things would have been different if I had a son and a decent husband."

#### So Many Dreams: Bhanumati's story

Bhanumati is a single woman. She left her village and came to stay in Gaon Maujpur in UP, from where she went to Nizamuddin, and finally in Khadar, where they were relocated after demolition of their house. She felt that that there was not much to do in the village. Her husband used to go from door to door selling cosmetics. Her family had a very small piece of land in the village, which had to be divided among the four brothers. So there was not enough to sustain the family. This need to sustain themselves was what propelled the family to migrate to Delhi.

"My in-laws have expired now, so there is no one of my family in the village to speak of. My three *devars* (brothers-in-law) stay in Delhi itself. When my mother-in-law was alive, I used to send money to her, but not any more.

Life was very different for me in the village. People in the city do not have any shame. There, I had to cover my head and always wear a *dupatta*. In the city, even if someone does anything wrong, you cannot tell them a thing or two. In the beginning, I did not like it in Delhi, but now slowly I have adjusted to it. *Ab apna kamana aur khane se matlab rakhte hain.* (We are only interested in earning our own living.)

In the beginning I worked as labour doing construction work. Then I worked in a *pyaoo* (public drinking water facility). My husband used to pull a *rikshaw*, he is no more now. He got work much later than I did.

Initially I used to feel very scared in Delhi. *Dahshat hoti thi, koi kya soche, pata nahi kaun kya sochega.* (I used to fear what people will think.) I did not know anything about the buses and had never travelled alone. The first time I did so was when my mother-in-law was ill and admitted in Nehru Hospital. I remember, on her second day in the hospital, I wanted to eat *aloo parantha*. My husband had to go to work, so he asked me to go alone. Since I was not very familiar with the roads I got down one stop before the right one. From a distance, my mother-in-law recognised me coming towards the hospital. She was extremely surprised when she found that I had come alone to the hospital. Then she kept telling everyone about her daughter-in-law's brave act! Since then I realized that to be able to read the numbers of the buses, is crucial to survive in this city. I was not educated in the village. When the question of going to school was raised, my grandmother had said '*masterni banegi kya?*' (she wants to become a teacher or what?!)

I have many relatives in this city. But these days everyone is so busy that there is no time to visit each other regularly. But, still, I try to go for weddings and other such occasions. Whenever we have some emergency in the family, we have to take loan from someone. I have taken Rs.30,000 from my daughter's mother-in-law. I also took Rs.5000 from my younger sister.

I rarely go out with the children. *Chidiaghar dekha par hamare liye nahi hai. Jiske pas paisa hai, vo hi Dunlop ke gadde par so sakta hai.* (I have seen the zoo, but all these things are not for the poor.) When some relatives come to visit Delhi, we go along with them. Otherwise, very rarely do we go out.

I went to the village last Diwali. I had gone alone this time.

I used to do a lot of seasonal work like selling fire-crackers during Diwali days. I used to go to the *mandi* in the morning and buy some vegetables for selling. Now that we have been sent here in Khadar, I am unable to go to the *mandi* as it is very far. There are many difficulties. People unnecessarily trouble a woman. Once when travelling in Nizamuddin, one man entered the same bogie and kept following me. I got very angry and went up to him and asked him what his problem was? Why was he following me? He understood the point and left the train.

What are my wishes? There are so many dreams! *Chakki lagvana chahti hoon.* (I want to set up a grinding mill.) And when I have enough money, I want to set up a shop of electronic goods."

#### Across the Border: Mehjabin's story

Mehjabin, a woman in her late 20's, is a cross border migrant from Bangladesh. She migrated to India with her children after her first husband died. Mehjabin is among the very few who do not hesitate to say they are from across the border. She even described her journey from Bangladesh to *Bharat* (India) in great detail. After we had done the demographic interview with her, many women came to her *jhuggi* to convince her not to give us any details, being suspicious of us being government officials. She believes strongly in God and thinks whatever happens, happens with God's wish.

"In the village, I did not do domestic work, as there are no *kothis* (households that can employ domestic workers) in the villages. Other than that I used to do a variety of other things like taking care

of the children and other members of the family. I would take the cattle for grazing. I got married in the village itself.

I was very upset at leaving. It was the place where I was born, after all. My husband died when the children were too young. By working in the city, I thought that I could earn some money for the children. So I decided to leave the village and come to the city. I took a train and came with a person from the same village. He helped me cross the border and then went back, as the police wouldn't allow him to enter *Bharat*.

The first place I came to was East of Kailash. I paid Rs.500 to the *dalal* (agent) who was engaged in the business of renting out *jhuggis*. He had initially asked for a thousand rupees and I had to do a lot of pleading to make him agree for 500. I told him that I was poor and could not afford so much money. I also had young children to look after.

I knew of this place because my sister had stayed in Delhi before me. I got remarried one year after coming here. This person said that he had fallen in love with me and wanted to marry me. At that time he was already married with children. He was staying in East of Kailash since the beginning.

I started working one year after marrying him. I worked for only three years, but had to stop working. I plan to get back to work very soon. My son has started doing *kabadi ka kaam* (junk dealer). I have sent my daughter to Bangladesh and she is studying in a good school there.

I started working in three houses and used to get Rs. 3000/-. My husband would want all the money that I earned. But I used to give him the money that I earned from only two houses and saved the money that I would get from another house. I didn't want to give him any money as he would blow it up in alcohol and playing cards.

From the places where I worked, I got a lot of benefits. They would give me meals, clothes and blankets. They supported me whenever my husband would ill treat me or beat me. They got my daughter admission in a school and also gave

her bag, notebooks etc. They would tell me that they would deduct my wages for the number of days that I took leave, but they never did! They only wanted me to let them know in advance whenever I wanted to take leave.

I stopped working because my husband forced me to. He didn't want me to work in the first place. He said that he was earning enough to support me. But, I am planning to get back to work very soon.

I have no choice but to work for the sake of the children. I have many problems. My husband does not provide for my needs, be it clothes or food. But for my son, I would have been absolutely alone. My husband gives very little money for the family expenses. *Jahan 200 kharcha hota hai vahan 100 deta hai.* (He gives half the amount needed.) These days since my son is also earning, he provides for my needs. He bought me gold earrings worth Rs.4000/- few days back. He really took care of me. My husband does not allow me to go out anywhere. Sometimes I go to the Nizamuddin Dargah with my sister but that too is very rare.

I do not go too often to the village. In five years, I have visited only once. In fact, I have just returned one month back. I paid Rs.750 for a reserved train ticket. The train went till Cooch Behar and from there to my village. Then I paid Rs. 50 for another vehicle from the border to the village. We try to cross the border when the security police at the border go for lunch around 1 or 1:30 pm. We pay a hundred rupees to another person to keep a watch on the police whether they are returning from their meals. It's just a thin wire that marks the border, anyway. So quickly we have to pull the wire and enter *Bharat*. We have to come back also the same way. Once I was caught while crossing the border and was asked many questions. But I told the police that I had come to meet my mother and many other such excuses. I had to bribe the police tucking notes worth Rs. 200 in his hand.

Sexual harassment is very common even in this *basti*. But I have never experienced such a thing. I did not want to remarry after coming to Delhi, but my husband forced me to marry him. He promised that he would give me ten thousand rupees if I

married him but he never gave any money. He was already married and had five children. Also, he told other people from the *basti* to persuade me to marry him. In compulsion I had to marry him. One of the other reasons why I got married was that if I had been alone, anyone would have tried to take advantage of me. So I thought it was better to marry that man.

I was not at all happy with him. He beat me regularly. Whenever I refused to give him money that I earned from the houses, he would abuse and beat me. Once when he was drunk he had beaten me so much that blood clotted in my eyes. *Aakhon mein khoon jama ho gaya tha*. I hid my eyes and did not mention it to anyone. When I went to work, the *malkin* noticed my swollen red eyes. She wanted to know the details of the matter. On knowing all that had happened, she asked me to report to the police and said that she would support me as someone from their family was in the police. Even the police who came to East of Kailash to find Bangladeshis knew that my husband tortured me. They had warned him and also told me to hit back when he mistreated me.

Am I happy? *Allah jaisa rakhta hai, vaise hi rehna padega. Sab allah ke dua hai*. (It's all in Allah's hands.) I wish that everyone should be peaceful and happy. I want my children to be educated and happy. I want to stay in Delhi with my son. But who knows, when the *jhuggis* are broken in East of Kailash I may go to my first husband's home in Calcutta or to my mother's village in Bangladesh."

#### Starting Again: Zarina Begum's story

Zarina is a 32 year old woman who says she is from West Bengal. She came around 20 years ago and was married at that time to a man who was much older than her. She did not even know Hindi when she arrived and stayed nearby in Garhi, with a relative from their village. She did not work till about 8-9 years after coming to Delhi.

She worked as a domestic worker for about three years in seven houses and used to earn about Rs.3500 per month. From these seven homes, she

never got anything except once when she got an old sari for the occasion of Diwali. She did not like the work as she found the households very oppressive and for that reason, she left the work. Then she started the work of collecting garbage from people's homes. She used to get Rs. 600 per month for collecting the garbage. Three years after that, she decided to open her own shop for junk-dealing. She manages the home and the work and everything else on her own. When she is at work her neighbour looks after her children.

Every time the police takes a round, she has to pay Rs. 300 to them, otherwise they trouble her. They come to look for any stolen goods in her shop.

When asked whether she faces the problem of harassment, she responds by saying that there are bad people who always tease the women. She feels that it happens to all women no matter how rich or poor you are. But only the men from your social class will tease you, not those from the higher class, she feels. They are in their cars, and so, not lower, they are too scared to tease women. It happens on the roads and buses. She said that she meets different men at work, but none of them have ever tried anything with her. She says that she does not move around much at all. She mostly stays at home, so nothing happens to her. When asked about domestic violence, she says that her husband is a good man. But at the same time, she also feels that all husbands do hit their wives, and she is no exception. Her husband used to smoke *ganja* earlier, but she made him break this habit.

When asked what she wants from life, she responds by saying that she is not greedy, and that she is fortunate that she does not have too many troubles. Only thing that worried her is that of kidney stone. She cannot be operated on as she is too weak. So the doctor has advised her to eat properly to gain strength.

Zarina's was one of the families who lost their homes due to the demolition. But they were also one of the lucky ones who were allotted a plot of land in the new area. We met her again after the demolition at her new home.

"I got my belongings – clothes, trunks, suitcase, utensils. I could not take out the iron rods used in making the house. All that was broken. When I went later I found that it had all been sold. Then I got some labourers to remove stone and bricks from my brother's house which I got here – my place was all broken.

I was told that I would get 18 square yards but got only 12 – though we also paid Rs.7000 as the ones who got 18 ...This place is so far away that if I walk it takes me more than half an hour. I take a *rickshaw* from inside the village – that costs 10 rupees. And it costs me Rs. 5 by bus to go home (Zarina still calls Garhi her home). I can take a van there.

I have opened a go-down in the Khadar village itself. I got land from a Gujjar and pay a rent of Rs. 3200 per month. I have got three labourers from Garhi itself – they get the material which is sorted out and sold here. Things are still very new here and I need support. It takes me 30 minutes to reach

the go-down and by rickshaw, I have to pay 10 rupees. *Yahan par zindagi bekaar hai.* (Life is lousy here.) If my work succeeds, I will stay here, or else I will have to move. I will have to go back to Garhi as there is more scrap material available there. Here I have to pay for transport of the labour, transport for carting the material. This area is difficult.

My husband is of no use. He was not there at the time of demolition and is hardly here – he roams around to Ajmer, Bombay and I have to send him money. He is a Bangladeshi and I am an Indian. My brother helped me with the house, to fix the tin walls and bamboos for the roof. He helps me now and sits in the go-down. This place is in the middle of nowhere – it costs so much money and time to commute. Fruits and vegetables are not available. There is no decent food and vendors are not regular. But I like the openness and green of this area."

# LOOKING AHEAD: SOME CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# 7

## Dealing with globalisation and privatisation

One of the biggest challenges to the rights of migrant women is the changing policies of liberalisation and globalisation. The process of feminisation of migration needs to be contextualised and understood in the backdrop of such policies. The changes brought about throughout the world because of globalisation, are one of the main factors that led to the moving out of a large number of women from their homes and villages in search of livelihoods. These new policies and current economic systems have had the worst impact on women, especially poor women. In the pretext of flexible labour, female labour is getting grossly exploited without any workplace benefits. Since women are at the end of the priority list of the family, the resources bestowed on them, if any, are also the least. Although it seems impossible to reverse these processes, it is important to understand them in order to become better prepared to handle these. Understanding the vulnerabilities that the women face in the rapidly globalising world and devising creative ways to deal with these are the biggest challenges to the women's movement and the developmental sector in general.

## Cross border migration policy

One of the things that has emerged very strongly during this study is the need to have a transparent and comprehensive policy for cross-border migration. The issues like those of the Bangladeshi migrants are issues of the state's concern and it is important to constantly monitor what the state is doing about it. Although not denying the need to monitor persons crossing the borders of one nation

and entering the other, there is a much bigger question of human rights that needs to be addressed. On what basis are Bengali migrants arbitrarily rounded up and put away in police custody? How are women taken away at night, or men taken away mysteriously and sent back overnight without any proper investigative procedures? The migrants, whether illegal or not, have some basic rights which are usually violated with impunity. Various stories of sexual violence in custody did come to us, but were not elaborated on for fear of the shame associated with such issues.

It is also necessary to have a national or regional framework for the procedure of deportation of 'illegal migrants' with proper consideration to the time frame given and the issues of human rights of these migrants. Who comes under this category of 'illegal migrants' is also often contested, with families who have been here for over 30 years and equipped with the requisite documents, also being put in this category, especially in a bout of deportations in 2003. This sudden 'cleansing' attempted by the State in 2003 had a faint whiff of religious intolerance, and was perceived by many as being a way of arbitrarily 'pushing out' Muslim Bengalis from Hindu India. Some system needs to be put into place to monitor such arbitrary acts by the State in the name of 'national security', as we have seen that they trample on the rights of people and irreparably damage lives and communities.

## Unorganised Sector Bill

The unorganised sector in this country, in which the majority of women work, is a huge unregulated pool of labour. The majority of the population depends on this sector for survival. In spite of this

significance, this sector has received less attention from the State. The unorganised or informal sector is characterised by: a high degree of exploitation, lack of protection, no infra-structural support, job insecurity, absence of worker's benefits and the absence of organised power for collective bargaining. This means most of the nation's workforce is placed in a vulnerable position, with no or low access or information on their rights as workers.

The recent attempt by the Labour Commission at drafting an Unorganised Sectors' Bill is an important development as it could be an answer to the problems of the unorganised sector. The Bill aims to clarify and list all the economic activities that are part of this sector, and create some sort of framework within which these activities or work can be understood and assessed. However, one of the major loopholes of that bill is that it excludes domestic workers from the list of 122 occupations that it mentions. It is most crucial to advocate for the inclusion of this huge category of workers for the benefits of the bill. By excluding this category of workers, the State has demonstrated that it is gender insensitive, as women's labour within the home (even paid) continues to be invisibilised and undervalued. Domestic workers also face additional vulnerabilities, having to work in a 'private' sphere, in which behaviour of the employers or work conditions cannot be monitored; they are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Moreover, domestic workers are beginning to get organised in many parts of the country and can be a test case in demonstrating how workers in the informal sector can operate at a collective level.

We also need to understand the responsibility of the employer (or contractor/ subcontractor) in regulating this sector. Often, the total disregard for basic rights of a human being is evident, for example the lack of drinking water facilities at a construction site, or toilets (this affects women more), and employers must be made accountable for these conditions. In the case of full-time domestic workers, the agencies that place the domestic workers may or may not be registered with the government. Numerous such agencies have come up with the motive of earning profit by

placing the workers with a household. It has been seen in the past that in case of any atrocity on the women placed by them, they do not usually play any active role in fighting for her rights. It is thus important to have all such agencies also made accountable for the conditions in which domestic workers are placed, and ensuring that the agencies conform to some rules and minimum standards.

We have also found that women who work from home are in a particularly exploitative situation; they are extremely low paid, this amount is usually ad-hoc and rarely consistent. Added to this is the exploitation based on the self image of the women as this being 'not really work', which is capitalised on by third party beneficiaries (those who take the work to the homes of the women from the factories and take a commission for doing so) by not providing information to them or taking large cuts. Home-based workers need special attention.

### Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

Although the Supreme Court guidelines (Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan) regarding sexual harassment at the workplace address some of the major issues around this, it has still not been implemented in most places. One of the biggest critiques of the guidelines was that it does not apply to the unorganised sector. Recently a national bill on sexual harassment at the workplace based on the guidelines has been drafted and efforts have been made to try and make it applicable to this sector.

However, this is not an easy task. As we found in the study, while the incidence of sexual harassment in the unorganised sector is clearly high, there is such a strong taboo on speaking about it (they are only to be discussed off the record, or in the third person), that a much broader 'breaking of the silence' is yet to be done in this area. We need to understand the specificities of the issue in this sector more deeply, as it has been done to some extent in the organised sector.

Further, in the unorganised sector, there is no redressal mechanism to deal with any of the problems workers face, leave alone that of sexual harassment. The issue of sexual harassment in the

unorganised sector also needs to be addressed in the Unorganised Sector Bill, as part of a broader redressal mechanism for violation of rights. Again, employers will have to take responsibility for creating safe workplaces for women, and be part of the solution.

### Policy for Demolition of Slums

Our experience at what practically happens at the ground level when orders are passed for demolition of slum settlements leads us to believe that the process is ad-hoc, not transparent, and often based on the whims and fancies of local politicians or attempts of local strongholds to capture property for profitable purposes. They are also disrespectful of the rights of the people living in the slums (some for over thirty years!) and do not give enough time for a process of rehabilitation. Added to this is the red-tapism and corruption, which is faced by the displaced persons when they approach civic authorities for the resettlement claims.

The policies regarding demolition, resettlement and rehabilitation need to be looked at more carefully, and an assessment of their impact also needs to be done. After all, when most of these populations are displaced from one area, there will be another 'illegal' settlement which will rise in another area – sometimes, just across the road. This is linked to the broader issue of the failure of the State to provide an infrastructure to a growing city, and particularly the failure to provide services and facilities – education, health, housing, electricity, water and sanitation – to poor people. The State cannot wish away the basic requirements of people migrating to the city; as citizens, they also hold Constitutional rights and as workers, it must be recognised that it is their labour that holds up the city and contributes to the national economy.

### Men's Role in Household Responsibilities

A rather neglected area of advocacy has been that of men's role and active participation in household responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, although women's work has increased in the past few years, it has not been complemented by a rise in involvement of men in the responsibilities at home.

As a result women (all over the world) face a double, sometimes triple burden: that is, they are involved in paid work, plus the responsibilities of household work and the work of care for children and elderly remain their responsibility. There are deeper issues of sex-gender roles and notions of masculinity attached to this. It is crucial that men contribute equally in the household tasks, if women's rights are to be realized and their labour at home and as care-givers is to be recognised and valued.

### Sensitisation of Police

We found that the people in the slum settlements have a tense relationship with the State and its machinery. The police, in particular, has a strong presence in their lives. From taking regular bribes for allowing a woman to maintain a tea-shop in a corner, or searching homes indiscriminately for 'stolen goods' at any time of day or night, to rounding up suspected illegal migrants, there is a nexus between the police and various activities in the slum areas. However, it is the police also to whom the people turn in the event of any problems. A good, sensitive police officer in a local station can really change the lives of the people in the area. The role of the police, therefore, needs to be looked at more carefully. It is important that they be sensitised to gender issues and able to look beyond traditional patriarchal prejudices. In the course of our fieldwork, we have seen the results of, and heard about, the brutalities of the police on the poor migrant women, especially on the Bangladeshi migrants. The police need to be made accountable for their actions, as they have a potentially positive role to play in the community.

### Safe Public and Private Spaces for Women

There is a need to establish that public spaces exist for women too! The women interviewed indicated many times that they face harassment from neighbours, the passers-by and the police. In addition women continue to face domestic violence in their homes. This continues to remain a key challenge in realizing women's rights: ensuring that women are safe, not only just inside the home and the community, but also in public spaces.



