

Employment, Gender Roles and Changing Family Structures In The Context of Labour Migration To Brick Kilns

Dr Reeti Debnath, *Associate Professor & Head of Department of Public Health, Bhawanipur Global Campus (Affiliated to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology), Kolkata, West Bengal*

Dr Pinaki Sensarma, *MBBS, MPH, DMCW, Associate Professor, Department. of Public Health, Bhawanipur Global Campus (Affiliated to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology), Kolkata, West Bengal*

ABSTRACT

Labour migration is a characteristic feature in the Indian economy. Migration may be driven by inequalities in local employment, wages, and access to living conditions. A growing phenomenon is being observed, where not only singles but the entire household migrates for seasonal work in peri-urban informal work settings. This type of seasonal migration can have various consequences for women, children and on the existing family structures. Our study explores the experiences of men and women engaged in the brick kiln industry, focusing on their roles, decision-making capacities, and coping strategies during transformation in family dynamics. The study employs a mixed-methods approach. Information was collected about migrant's family, livelihood patterns, migration history, drivers of migration, and household composition. Qualitative insights are drawn from in-depth interviews (IDs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with workers and their family members. The findings are expected to provide baseline relevant information that can enable policymakers to design targeted interventions and implement necessary reforms to reduce existing risks and promote the overall development of women and children in the migrant families.

Keywords: Labour Migration, Brick Kiln, Family Structures, Rural Households, Social Protection.

INTRODUCTION

Labour migration has become a characteristic feature in developing economies. This is majorly driven by inequalities in employment, wages, and access to living conditions. Across low, middle and high-income countries, individuals and households have illustrated increasing reliance on internal and out of the border migration as a significant livelihood strategy. While the economic dimensions of labour migration, such as extra earnings, remittance patterns and influence of labour markets have been widely studied globally, the social consequences, like changing gender roles and family structures in migrant households, which remain equally significant, are yet unevenly addressed (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Migration is not a gender-neutral process but it is shaped by prevailing gender norms and dominance of relationships that influence who will migrate and under what conditions, and

how the migration of a family member can affect the families left behind. Gender roles in the context of this study can be understood as a socially organized expectation about men's and women's responsibilities, autonomy and behaviour within the households, which are neither static nor uniform and many-a-times depends on the prevailing circumstances. Sometimes, migration can help to strengthen traditional gender roles in some settings (for example, by increasing women's unpaid domestic work and care burdens when men migrate). In other situations, the absence of men creates opportunities for women to engage in seasonal paid work and participate more actively in household decision-making, leading to shifts in established gender relations (International Organization for Migration, 2024; Antman, 2012; Kabeer, 2012). Migration can also lead to the separation of extended family households, as family members live at different locations. At the same time, families remain connected across distances through remittances, regular communication, and occasional return visits, forming transnational family networks (World Bank, 2023).

In India, climate change, agricultural degradation, limited local labour demands and earning opportunities is increasingly forcing populations to seek alternative livelihoods through seasonal or long-term migration. For many economically vulnerable and socially disadvantaged communities, seasonal migration to informal jobs like in brick kilns located at peri-urban sites constitutes a significant employment strategy (Das, 2020; Kumari and Subratha, 2025).

The brick industry is one of the largest employers in the construction sector of our economy and is conservatively projected to employ nearly 15-20 million workers (John, 2018). As urban boundaries continue to expand and the demand for construction materials rises, the brickfield industry continues to flourish. In West Bengal alone there are nearly ten thousand brick kilns, which are operated by over 1.5 million workers (News Click 2021). The expansion has increased labour demands and created new jobs, prompting populations from disadvantaged regions to migrate in search of secure livelihoods, and thus intensifying various social challenges (Save the Children Report, 2022).

The migrants are generally from the neighboring states as well as from rural areas in districts within the State. Despite the substantial number of workers involved, several researchers view that this occupation remains largely unstructured and undocumented in the public domain (Chowdhury et al., 2024). A review of existing literature suggests that the major focus of ongoing research has been on the informal and unregulated nature of brick kiln work, as they highlight issues such as advance-based recruitment and bonded labour, overwork, ill-health and hazardous working conditions, in addition to weak regulatory and protection mechanisms (Breman, 2016; International Labour Organization, 2018; Acharya, 2021). Limited attention is given to the social and cultural consequences of migration and employment patterns, particularly their implications on the women migrants, children, changing gender roles and family structures within the migrants' household (UN Women, 2020; Sahu, 2024).

OBJECTIVES

Our study aims to bridge this research gap by attempting to understand how labour vulnerability and migration to brick kilns restructure household organization, gendered roles, and the everyday social life of the migrant workers. The findings are expected to provide baseline relevant information that can enable policymakers to design targeted interventions and implement necessary reforms to reduce existing risks and promote the overall development of women and children in the migrant families.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was adopted in this study (Creswell and Clark, 2018). Using an interview schedule, information was collected about the migrant's family, their livelihood at native village, migration history, drivers of migration, and household composition. Qualitative insights are drawn from in-depth interviews (IDs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with workers and their family members.

- *Study Population:* The study involved 108 seasonal migrants who were working in the kiln sites during two operating seasons. Duration was from December 2024 to May 2025 and from October 2025 to December 2025. The participants were selected by purposive sampling and Snowball technique was implemented to identify migrants, contractors and the kiln managers.
- *Study Area:* Three functional brick kilns located in peri-urban areas of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA). The brick kilns are scattered in the northern and southern fringes of the city bordering the River Hooghly (shown in Figure 1).
- *Data Collection Methods:*
 - IDs and FGDs were conducted with male and female migrant workers to understand livelihood changes and migration experiences.
 - Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Conducted with health officials, labour contractors and kiln managers to identify study areas and understand recruitment and wage patterns.
 - Field Observations
- *Ethical Considerations:* The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of NSHM Knowledge Campus, vide approval no NSHMKOL/IEC/3/2024/PR-23. Participation was voluntary. Interviews were video recorded with informed consent to ensure accuracy and to capture both verbal and non-verbal expressions, which enrich the contextual understanding of responses.

Those migrants who could understand and communicate in the local language (Bengali) and Hindi were interviewed. Others, who could not converse in Hindi, were not interviewed, but their work-related activities and ways of experiencing life at the kiln sites were observed and analyzed as a part of the study. Secondary data for reference was collected from previous studies and reports published in journals and reliable websites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic Profile & Household Characteristics

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. Details of migrants' age, sex, religion, marital status, caste, educational status, number of members in the family, occupation and native village (State) is provided.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics (N= 108)	No. of Migrants (%)
Age (years)	
18-25	59 (54.6%)
26-35	34 (31.5%)
36-45	15 (13.9%)
Sex	
Male	47 (43.5%)
Female	61 (56.5%)
Marital Status	
Married	62 (57.4%)
Single/Separated/Widow/Widower	46 (42.5%)
Religion	
Hindu	108 (100%)
Caste	
General	4 (3.7%)
Scheduled Caste (SC)	32 (29.6%)
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	72 (66.7%)
Education	
Illiterate	79 (73.1%)
Read & write without formal schooling	8 (7.5%)
Primary school and above	21 (19.4%)
Occupation at Native Village	
Agriculture	89 (82.4%)
Fishing	9 (8.3%)
Others (pottery, honey collection, bheris)	10 (9.3%)
Family Size	
≤3 members	16 (14.8%)
4-6 members	79 (73.2%)
7 members and above	13 (12.0%)
State of Migration	
Sundarbans (West Bengal)	26 (24.1%)
Bihar	20 (18.5%)
Jharkhand	62 (57.4%)

More than half proportion (54.6%) of migrants were in the age group of 18-25 years. The average age of the migrant population was found to be 26.97 years, which indicates that young adults primarily compose the migrant workforce. 43.5% of migrants in the study group were males compared to females (56.5%). All migrants were Hindus, with the majority (66.7%) belonging to the ST category. 82.4% of migrants belonged to landless or marginal farming households, while the remaining (17.6%) were engaged in fishing, pottery, honey collection, or as daily wage earners in aquaculture ponds locally known as “*bheris*”. Education status was very unsatisfactory, 73.1% of the migrants were illiterate. Majority of households (73.2%) were medium-sized having 4–6 members. Migrants were identified from Sunderbans (43.6%), Jharkhand (57.4%) and Bihar (18.5%) (Refer Table 1).

Migration, Employment Patterns and Gendered Labour at Kiln Sites

FGDs were conducted separately with the migrant groups from Sunderbans, Bihar & Jharkhand. The FGDs helped the researchers to understand the day-to-day livelihood threats they are facing, and which compelled them to migrate to different parts of the country. Each FGD consisted of four to six respondents. FGDs confirmed that climate change, agricultural degradation and declining local labour demand as reasons for migration.

Migrants from Sunderbans informed that cyclone storms that hit the Sunderbans in the period 2009-2024 contributed hugely to destruction of land and cattle. Further deterioration has been caused by shrimp pond expansion and increasing soil salinity. Shrimp ponds require fewer workers compared to paddy farming, leading to a fall in labour demands (Sarkar, 2024). Secondary literature supports this trend by linking aquaculture with long-term soil infertility and shift of labour-intensive agriculture (Hossain et al., 2013; Ayamga et.al., 2018).

All migrants from Sunderbans were singles and stayed together in groups in the makeshift houses inside the brick kiln areas (BKAs). This observation suggests that only male out-bound migration in the Sunderbans is primarily an individual survival strategy, which may have less direct impact on gender roles and family structures at the kiln-site. On the other hand, women left behind in the village may have to shoulder greater responsibility managing households, elderly, along with childcare, presenting a gendered responsibility shift.

Migrants from Jharkhand and Bihar highlighted poverty and debt as major reasons for migration. They were helped with advance money by brick kiln contractors whom they call “*bhaiyyas*”. They migrate with their entire family, which includes children less than five years old. Migrants spend the full working season in the BKAs, that ranges from six to eight months.

During an interview, a female tribal migrant worker mentioned that she came to the brick kiln with her spouse and two children, primarily due to safety concerns and the absence of reliable social support systems in her native villages. Though her workload has multiplied, she feels comfortable sharing work with her husband rather than being left behind in the village. She explained-

“If I stay back in the village, who will look after the children? It is better to come here with my husband. At least we are together, even if the work is hard.”

Her elder daughter around nine years old takes care of the sibling (who is nearly four years old) and manages some of the household work while she is engaged in the kiln. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight similar family-linked migration decisions among migrant labourers, particularly among tribals, where mobility is perceived as a collective survival strategy rather than an individual choice (Das et al., 2020; Sinha et al., 2022). They also mentioned about coming to the brick kilns for multiple seasons.

All migrants from Jharkhand and Bihar belonged to either SC or ST communities, indicating that socio-cultural norms and caste-based vulnerabilities shape different gendered migration flows across regions. Lack of bargaining power, earning opportunities and access to basic rights can expose them to exploitation and social exclusion.

In the BKAs, both the husband and wife actively engage in various processes of brick manufacturing. Males participate in manual excavation, clay preparation, moulding, firing and loading baked bricks to trucks for delivery. The females contribute to the moulding, stacking and drying process as well as carrying head loads of coal, baked and unbaked bricks.

Household Dynamics and Family Structure

57.4% of migrants were identified as married in the study population. This suggests that migration is largely undertaken by individuals with family responsibilities. The higher proportion of married migrants also reflects economic obligations such as household maintenance, childcare, and dependent family members, which often act as strong push factors for migration.

Families reside in small one or two-room makeshift houses made of bricks located adjacent to the production zones. Houses have electricity, but lack fans, even though the summer months are considered the peak season for brick production. Piped water sources are scarce and drinking water is mostly drawn from the tube wells, in addition sanitation facilities around the living areas are sub-minimal. The study identifies that family-based migration has resulted in a massive alteration of gender roles and family structures. Women's participation in various jobs inside the BKAs has definitely increased their visibility in income-generating activities. However, this economic contribution has not always translated into increasing decision-making power or autonomy within the migrant households. The observations suggest that migrant women are experiencing a double burden. The burden of paid labour at the kiln and unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities within the household, including childcare, cooking, and maintenance of the house under difficult brick site living conditions.

Children have to accompany parents to kiln sites, leading to interruptions in schooling and early exposure to labour environments. During field observations, it was noted that many girl children (aged 8<12 years), in particular, manage the home and take care of younger siblings

while their parents are at work. Some children (aged 12-15 years) were found to assist their parents in small tasks, exposing them to occupational hazards and limiting their educational engagement as well. Thus, the researcher's observations are that the women and children in the brick kilns face more intense challenges, including precarious working conditions, limited access to health, education and coverage under social protection schemes. Consequently, the study identifies existing gender inequalities in the informal workforce, despite creating limited new income avenues for the migrant women.

Family-based migration is transforming inter-generational relationships, as well, by compromising the health and education of migrant children. The study highlights that labour vulnerability in the study group extends beyond economic deprivation and is intensifying social insecurity and eroding traditional familial support systems.

CONCLUSION

Brick kiln migration must not be understood merely as an economic phenomenon, but a deep social process that is reshaping gender relations and family life under conditions of labour vulnerability. The FGDs and IDIs with single migrants and family-based migrant households reveal important variations in their social experiences, with more specific transformations observed among families migrating together with their spouses and small children.

The results highlight the need for gender-sensitive labour policies that will prioritise women's experiences in the informal sector. Labour governance frameworks must ensure safe working conditions, social protection, childcare, healthcare, and access to education for children, recognising women's central role in household and community well-being. The Government of India has launched many security and welfare schemes, e-Shram is one such initiative under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, and a step towards creating the "Aadhaar Authenticated Comprehensive National Database of Unorganized Workers" (NDUW). It aims to provide social security and welfare benefits to the workers in the informal sector. However, information about this scheme is inadequate among the beneficiaries, and the same is concluded from this study as well. While the schemes can bring out significant changes, a recent study identifies difficulties in the registration process and effective digital utility due to limited digital literacy, language barriers, technical hitches and inadequate outreach to migrant communities (Rajput & Rajan, 2025). These issues need to be addressed to intensify reach to the targeted populations.

Recently, in September 2025, the government launched the "*Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan*" (SNSPA) to strengthen health care and its access to women and children, but its coverage in the migrant populations is yet to be ascertained (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Governments need to strengthen migration related data collection systems and should be willing to share it with researchers and NGO partners for collaborative initiatives. Addressing these social and cultural needs alongside economic participation is essential to promote equitable gender roles, reduce vulnerability, and enhance the well-being of women and children in migrant families.

LIMITATIONS

Finding reliable intervention-based data over time is challenging, since most of the migrants in this study are seasonal. It is difficult to keep track of the migrants in the same brick kiln in the next operating season. The sample size is limited however the study provides rich household-level insights into the social and cultural dimensions of brick kiln migration. Further studies on a large scale can be done in the future to obtain more desirable information from this selected group of marginalized population.

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