

# A Study of Internal Working Female Migrants in Kochi City, Kerala

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## Abstract

As migration is dominated by men, with women comprising either residual or dependent followers, its gender dimensions are rarely addressed in literature in India. The decision to migrate of women is often highly influenced by intra-household gender relations and hierarchies. They often migrate out of concerns of household poverty or to ensure family survival through remittances as supplementary income. In this context, the paper attempts to study the socio-economic background, and working and living conditions of working female migrants in Kochi city. It also examines the reasons for their migration, benefits received and the problems faced at work in the city. The paper is based on primary data collected from 184 female migrants working in urban informal labour market of Kochi city, Kerala State, during January to April 2023. The findings of the study revealed all the sample migrant women to be engaged in informal sector, owing to their low education and skill. While their push factors for migration were poverty and debt at native home, the pull factors to Kochi city included more regular employment and better income. They are largely self-employed and work as domestic help or street vendors. They work for hours longer than prescribed under minimum work hours, besides lacking social protection measures. Their perceived problems at work were low wages, work not regular and longer working hours. The major benefits of migrant family in Kerala were better employment and income, infrastructure and children's education. The Lorenz curve shows that there is a significant decline in the income inequality among migrant households with the additional income earned by the female migrants. The study recommends the need for local language mediators, to help the migrants benefit from the State's migrant workers welfare schemes.

**Keywords:** Female Migrants, Urban Informal Economy, Unskilled Occupation.

## 1. Introduction

Globally there has been rise in internal migration among women, especially in developing countries due to the changing socio-economic situations. There was an accelerated rural to urban migration from 19th to mid-20th century in high income countries, after industrialisation. But today, the largest internal population movements occur in middle income countries, particularly China and India [1]. The 2011 Census of India reveals that 37 percent of the population, (45.36 crore) are internal migrants, of whom almost 70 per cent are women [2]. Although marriage-induced migration or associated migration continues to be the predominant reason for their migration, its importance has declined post liberalisation. It is because of export-oriented economic development has created demand for women labour [3]. With the growth of urban centres in India, the demand for caregivers also rose, creating more opportunities for women in urban informal labour market spaces [4].

Researchers had not been concerned about the migration of women in particular till the 1970s. Family migration gained importance in the following decade, but women's role in migration continued to be overlooked. In the Indian context, migrant women were often perceived as victims of sexual and labour exploitation, and hence, all social sanctions, policies and interventions aimed to arrest women's mobility [5]. It was only in the 1980s that research focused on women's agency in migration and recognised the gendered migratory movements. Later in the late 1990s, the increasing participation of women in migration flows came to be widely discussed, resulting in the emergence of the term 'feminisation of migration' [6]. Today, there is in-depth discussion about the differences in aspirations and determinants of men and women migration, different experiences during their journey and at the destination, varied network structure and their integration outcome [7].

Chant and Radcliffe [8] reported that women were more likely to make migration decisions based on their family, rather than individually. Their decision to move was often based on helping the family. Some migration may be due to individual reasons instead of motivated by family. Tacoli [9] noted that migration allowed for both a migrant's self-interest and self-sacrifice for the family. According to Asis [10] and Espiritu [11], some Filipino women considered migration as a way to gain freedom from familial control and to make more independent choices, including on issues such as marriage. Further, migrant women experiencing more autonomy, different norms and material gain motivated more women to migrate [12]. Increased women in the recent past desired to migrate and experience urban life and more freeing social norms [7]. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) [13] studies on Moldova and Guatemala revealed that single mothers, widows or divorcees who experienced discrimination were likely to use migration to escape social stigma. As Hugo [14] put it, migration could both be a cause and consequence of female empowerment.

As migration is dominated by men, with women either residual in the process or dependent followers [15,16] its gender dimensions have been rarely addressed in literature in India. The decision to migrate of women is often highly influenced by intra-household gender relations and hierarchies. Their resolve to migrate is often triggered by the fundamental concerns of poverty or to ensure household survival through remittances [17]. The migration of women is increasingly considered as an alternate option to supplement family income [18]. Further, as the demand for labour rises in highly gendered occupations, like domestic work, health sector, and child and elderly care, besides garment and entertainment industries, it acts as a powerful pull factor for women to migrate, especially from rural areas [19]. Migrant women widely employed in informal jobs with no social security coverage are more prone to economic vulnerability [20]. Lack of awareness about government schemes, lack of financial and digital literacy and lack of sufficient documents also prevent them from availing entitlements [21]. However, with low education and skill, bargaining power and prevailing social norms, saddled with the sole responsibility of childcare and household chores, lack of information about job availability in different sectors and details of workplace demands, often keep women confined to a few employment [22]. In addition, gender inequality assumes a crucial role in encouraging migration, which poses challenges for the children who migrate with them for sufficient food, nutrition and education [23]. In this context, the paper attempts to examine the following objectives: -

1. to over-view the socio-economic background of working female migrants in Kochi city, Kerala;
2. to study the employment structure and earnings of the migrant females;
3. to examine reasons of migration, benefits received and the problems faced at work by the female migrants in the study area; and

4. to examine the inequalities in income distribution in migrant households with and without female income.

The paper is organised as follows. After the brief introduction and objectives outlined in section 1, the data and methodology used by the study are described in section 2. The empirical results are discussed in section 3, while the concluding remarks are given in the last section.

## 2. Data and Methodology

The study focuses on the inter-state migrants in Kochin Corporation of Ernakulam District, Kerala. Primary survey was conducted during January to April 2023 using pre-tested shedule. Data were collected from a random sample of 184 working migrant women, working in urban informal labour market. Simple averages, percentages, ratios, Garret ranking technique [24] and Lorenz curve have been used to study the objectives. Gini ratio has been used to examine the inequalities in income distributions with and without female income. F- test has been estimated to verify where the income inequalities are statistically significant.

## 3. Results and Discussions

The results of the study are discussed here. Table – 1 provides the present age and education of the migrant female respondents.

**Table 1: Current Age and Education of the Female Migrants**

Sl. No.	Details	No. of Female Respondents (%)
<b>A. Age in Years</b>		
1	20-30	59 (32.06)
2	30-40	89 (48.36)
3	40-50	30 (26.34)
4	50-60	5 (2.71)
5	60-70	1 (0.54)
	Total	184 (100)
<b>B. Education Level</b>		
1	Illiterate	71 (21.60))
2	Primary	32 (17.39)
3	Middle	56 (33.54)
4	Secondary	21 (11.41)
5	Higher secondary	3 (1.6)
6	Degree	1 (0.51)
	Total	184 (100)

**Note: Brackets show percentages.**

About half of the respondents (48.36%) are in the age group of 30-40. Nearly one-third (32.06%) of them are between 20 to 30 years of age. About 26.34 percent of the female migrants are in the age group 40-50. While 2.71 percent of them belong to the 50-60 age group, only one female respondent is above 60 years.

Regarding their educational status, 33.54 percent have up to middle school level education, while a little less than a quarter of them are illiterate (21.60%). About 17.39 percent have primary education and 11.41 percent have completed secondary education. Very few have higher secondary (1.6%) and degree qualification (0.51%).

**Table – 2 shows the work experience of the female migrants in Kerala.**

**Table 2: Work Experience of Migrant Respondents**

Sl. No.	Work Experience in Years	No. of Female Respondents (%)
1	Upto 5	117 (63.58)
2	5-15	53 (28.80)
3	15-25	10 (5.42)
4	25-35	4 (2.16)
	Total	184 (100)

**Note: Brackets show percentages.**

Nearly two-third of the total female migrants are quite new to the job market, with a work experience of upto five years. More than a quarter of the migrants have a work experience between 5-15 years (28.80 %). About 5.42 percent have higher years of experience of 15-25 years in the job market in Kerala. Only four migrants have 25-35 years of experience. Although the duration of migration is higher for most of them, many of them entered into the labour market only in recent years because of their household responsibilities.

Table – 3 gives the reasons for migration of female migrants.

**Table 3: Reasons for Migration of the Female Migrant Respondents**

Sl. No.	Reasons	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
1	Better education for children	1185	4.197	10
2	Higher standard of living	601	2.427	12
3	Income difference	10119	31.27	1
4	Regular employment	9679	29.94	2
5	Own caste people dominate	5498	17.27	5
6	Poverty	8791	27.25	3
7	Natural calamity	309	1.54	13
8	Family moved	1924	6.43	8
9	To repay debt	8512	26.4	4
10	To make savings	826	3.10	11
11	Farm distress	1994	6.65	7
12	Oppression by higher caste people in villages	225	1.29	14
13	Family problems	1481	5.309	9
14	Friends moved	4365	3.83	6

Income difference and regular employment are the two highest ranked pull factors of migration for the female respondents. Poverty and debt in home State were ranked third and fourth reasons of migration. The fifth ranked reason was own caste people dominate in the place of destination. The sixth rank is assigned to friends moved, indicating the importance of network connections in destination as a deciding factor for migration. The seventh ranked reason for migration was farm distress and eighth family moved. The ninth rank was given to family problems that pushed them to move out of their villages. The tenth reason was to provide better education to their children. Eleventh reason was to make savings and twelfth to attain higher standard of living. The last ranked two reasons were natural calamity and oppression by higher caste people in villages.

Table - 4 presents the nature of job and occupational structure of the migrant female respondents.

**Table 4: Occupational Structure of the Female Migrants**

Sl. No	Details	No. of Female Respondents (%)
<b>A. Nature of Job</b>		
1	Regular long-term employee with monthly wage	30 (16.31)
2	Self-employment	72 (39.13)
3	Daily wage casual worker	35 (19.02)
4	Regular employee with a daily wage/piece wage	47 (25.54)
	Total	184 (100)
<b>B. Type of Work</b>		
1	Salesgirl/helper/ domestic maid	68 (36.95)
2	Cook and cleaning (hotel, bakery)/ hotel waitress	7 (3.80)
3	Ironing /tailor/ embroidery work/dying	16 (8.69)
4	Security/construction worker/ casual worker/ cleaning (shopping mall, hospital, office)	33 (17.93)
5	Bakery, grocery store/own hotels/ catering business	17 (9.23)
6	Street vendor/street foods/ flower seller/clay pot seller/ rag pickers/lottery/ paani puri/ paan paraag	43 (23.36)
7	Teacher	1 (0.54)
	Total	184 (100)

**Note: Brackets show percentages.**

Majority of the female migrants (39.13%) are self-employed, especially as street vendors. Under regular employee with daily wage category and quarter (25.54%) migrants primarily work as house maids. Rest of the working female migrants come under the two categories of daily casual wage worker (19.20%) and regular employee with monthly wage (16.31%).

About 36.95 percent female migrants are working as salesperson, helper or domestic help. About 23.36 percent of them work as street vendors, street foods sellers, rag pickers, lottery sellers, fish sellers, paani puri and paan paraag sellers. Meanwhile, 17.93 percent are engaged as construction workers, factory workers, cleaners and security staff in shopping mall, hospital and office. About 9.23 percent run bakery, garment and grocery store, own hotels or catering business. Further, 8.69 percent are engaged in ironing, tailoring, hand embroidery and dying activities. Only 3.80 percent work in hotels and as waitress, while only one migrant is a teacher in a primary school.

Table - 5 shows the number of hours worked in a day, number of days worked in a month and number of months worked in a year by the female migrants.

**Table 5: Work Details of the Female Migrant Respondents**

Sl. No.	Details	No. of Working Female Respondents (%)
<b>A. Work Hours per Day</b>		
1	Less than 8	45 (24.48)

2	8-10	103 (55.97)
3	10-12	34 (18.47)
4	More than 12	2 (1.08)
	Total	184 (100)
<b>B. Number of Days Employed per Month</b>		
1	Up to 20	34 (18.49)
2	20-25	89 (48.37)
3	Above 25	61 (31.14)
	Total	184 (100)
<b>C. Number of Months Worked per Year</b>		
1	Up to 8	24 (13.04)
2	8-10	97 (52.72)
3	10-12	63 (34.24)
	Total	184 (100)

**Note: Brackets show percentages.**

In the case of work hours per day, 55.97 percent of the female migrant workers toil hard for eight to 10 hours a day. About 24.48 percent of them work for less than eight hours, mostly the domestic maids. As much as 18.47 percent work for 10 to 12 hours per day, more than the minimum work hours. About 1.08 percent female migrants also work for more than 12 hour per day, in running own hotels and tea shops. Besides, these women also face the additional burden of household chores, while simultaneously engaged in paid employment. As regards the number of days worked per month, 48.37 percent of the female migrants work for 20 to 25 days per month. About 31.14 percent work for more than 25 days and 18.49 percent work for less than 20 days. Further, the number of months worked per annum shows that 52.72 percent working female migrants work for eight to ten months and go for vacation to their native home in Orissa, West Bengal and Assam during the rainy seasons. About 34.24 percent of the permanent female migrants find work almost all through the year in the city. There are also seasonal migrants (13.04%) who work for less than eight months in the city.

**Table – 6 presents the monthly earnings distribution of the female migrants.**

**Table 6: Monthly Earnings of Female Migrants**

Sl. No.	Details	No. of Working Female Respondents (%)
<b>A. Monthly Income in Rs.</b>		
1	Minimum	2000
2	Maximum	30000
3	Mean	15025.63
<b>B. Monthly Income Range in Rs.</b>		
1	Upto 10000	38 (20.65)
2	10000-20000	118 (64.13)
3	20000-30000	28 (15.21)

Total	184 (100)
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Note: Brackets show percentages.

The table shows that, the minimum and maximum monthly incomes of the female respondents are Rs. 2000 and Rs. 30000. The mean monthly income of the female respondents is Rs. 15025.63.

The income range reveals that many women work for low income, besides helping their husband in their work without any payment. About 20.65 percent of the migrant respondents earn less than Rs.10,000 a month. More than two-third of the female migrants (64.13%) have a monthly income between Rs. 10,000 to 20,000. Only 15.21 percent earn as high as Rs. 20,000 to 30,000 per month.

Table - 7 furnishes the work-related problems faced by the migrant respondents in the study area.

**Table 7 : Work Related Problems of the Female Migrants**

Sl. No.	Problems	No. of Working Female Respondents (%)
1	Not a regular employment	35 (19.02)
2	Exploited by intermediaries	2 (1.09)
3	Discriminatory treatment compared to local workers	2 (1.09)
4	Low wages	59 (32.07)
5	Sexual exploitation	2 (1.09)
6	Longer working hours	28 (15.22)
7	Lack of access to sanitation	3 (1.63)
8	Verbal abuse of the employer	3 (1.63)

Note: Multiple responses; and brackets show percentages.

Of the 184 working female migrants doing different jobs in the city, from domestic help, street vending, construction work, cooking help, cleaning work and running tea shops, 32.07 percent complained of lower wages compared to the male workers. Lack of regular job (19.02%) and longer working hours (15.22%) are the other work related problems experienced. Inadequate sanitation facility at workplace and verbal abuse from the employer experienced by few domestic maids (1.63% each) respectively are the other problems female migrants face. Sexual exploitation by their employers, discriminatory treatment compared to local worker and exploitation by intermediaries (1.09% each) respectively were also reported by two respondents each.

**Table – 8 illustrates the benefits received by the respondents’ families after their migration to Kerala.**

**Table 8: Benefits Received After Migration**

Sl. No.	Benefits	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
1	Better income	21555	65.32	1
2	Medical facilities	5419	16.42	6
3	Better food and accommodation	7575	22.95	5
4	Better job	9394	28.46	3
5	Better infrastructure	11220	34	2
6	Better education facilities for children	8793	26.65	4

7	Gained new skills	1096	3.32	7
8	Nothing specific	125	0.38	8

**Note: Brackets show percentages.**

The ranked benefits of migration quoted by the women workers include better income, infrastructural facilities and better job respectively as the top three benefits. Better educational facilities for their children was the fourth ranked benefit, followed by better food and accommodation and better medical facilities ranked fifth and sixth respectively. Very few female migrants stated to have gained new skills in the city, ranking it as the seventh benefit.

**Table - 9 shows the distribution of income among migrant households in two different situations, with female income and without female income.**

**Table 9: Income Distribution of Migrant Households With and Without Female Migrant Income**

Decile Groups	Monthly Household Income (Rs.)	Cumulative Percentage of Household Income	Monthly Household Income without Female Income (Rs.)	Cumulative Percentage of Monthly Household Income without Female Income
I	23000	4.96	13000	3.58
II	28480	11.67	15840	10.53
III	30000	19.07	18000	18.76
IV	32840	27.17	20000	20.05
V	36000	36.05	21000	30.15
VI	40000	45.87	24000	41.60
VII	43150	56.66	26000	54.67
VIII	46800	69.13	30000	69.19
IX	51200	84.19	31200	84.82
X	60000	100	45000	100
<b>Gini Index</b>	<b>0.190</b>		<b>0.233</b>	
<b>F-test</b>	<b>1.935**</b>			

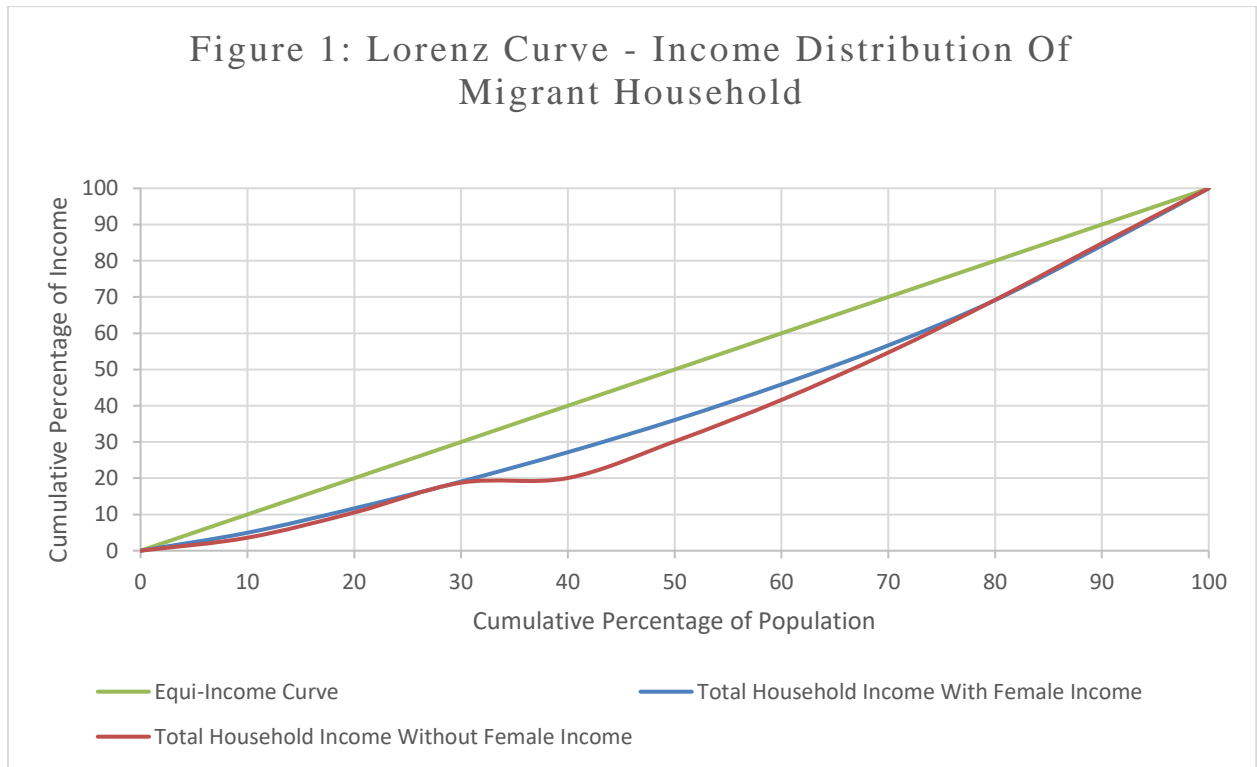
**Note: \*\* indicates significance at five percent level.**

The table shows that 40 percent of the migrant households (decile groups I-IV) account for 27 percent of the lower total monthly income. The remaining 60 percent in the higher income decile group earn 73 percent of the total monthly income.

In the household earning distribution without female income, the lower four decile groups earn only 20 percent whereas, the higher deciles together earn 80 percent of total monthly income. The Gini index shows that income inequality among migrant households decreased when the females earnings were included. The computed F- value shows a significant difference in the income inequality at five percent level between the two situations of with and without female income in total household income.

The Lorenz curve corresponding to the total monthly household income distribution with and without female migrants' monthly income is shown in figure 1.





In the figure, the Lorenz curve of total household income with female income lies closer to the equal income diagonal and is above the household income without female income curve. Thus, it may be inferred that female earnings contributes to lower income inequality of the household income distribution.

#### 4. Conclusion

Gender as a social construct influences the migration pathways and resources available to women and men. Experience and enjoyment of economic and social rights among migrants are also gender based [25]. Hence, there is a need to understand the issues and problems faced by female migrants in the destination States. The study was based on primary data collected during January to April 2023 from a random sample of 184 working migrant women, engaged in urban informal labour market of Kochi City, of Ernakulam District in Kerala. The paper studied the socio-economic background, nature of employment and earnings of the female migrants in the City. It also examined the reasons for migration, besides the benefits received and problems faced by them. Further, it investigated the contribution of their income and household income to income inequality.

The findings of the study showed that a vast majority of the working female migrants belonged to the younger age group of 20-40. Their education levels were very low, with only around one-tenth with school education and close to one-fifth illiterate. Nearly two-thirds of them had work experience of less than five years in the City. Income difference and regular employment were the major pull factors of migration, whereas poverty and debt in home State were the push factors of migration respectively.

Majority of them were unskilled, working as domestic help, street vendors, rag pickers and construction workers. Less than one-third were engaged in traditionally skilled jobs like catering, tailoring, dying and hand embroidery. Most of them were self-employed, especially as hawkers and street vendors, followed by regular employee with daily wage, primarily working as house maids. A quarter of them worked for less than eight hours, while the rest worked for more than eight hours, which is more than the minimum working hour a day.

Around one-third of them had work throughout the year, while the remaining including temporary migrants, worked in the city for less than eight months. Majority of the female migrants earned a monthly income between Rs. 10,000 to 20,000.

The major work related problems stated by one-third of the female migrants was low wages, which was much higher compared to their home State daily wages. They were paid less than the non-migrant workers. Better income, infrastructural facilities, better job, better educational facilities for their children, better food and accommodation and better medical facilities respectively were the main benefits received by these migrant women in the City. There is less inequality in household income distribution with female income than the household income distribution without it.

The study recommends the need for inclusive social policy to protect the rights of the working women migrants from being discriminated, exploited and harassed in Kochi city of Kerala. While the State has several schemes on health and education for the internal migrant workers, facilitating access to these services through local language mediators to pass on the information would help to integrate them into the social fabric of the City. Further, effective implementation of migrant's registration and management system could be useful in resolving the issues regarding their identity and easy inclusion.

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