

HEALTH HAZARDS AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY OF SUGARCANE CUTTER WOMEN MIGRANTS OF MAHARASHTRA STATE

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Abstract

According to the Maharashtra Economic Survey Report 2018-19, about 36% of the country's sugar factories are in Maharashtra. Every year thousands of women from the asset poor regions migrate to the sugar belt of Maharashtra and Karnataka to cut cane with their husband in the form of Koyata owing to the practice of hiring couples. Migrant cane cutters especially women are most vulnerable and continue to suffer from a number of health and security risks. The vulnerable working conditions and demand of hard labour work affects the health of women. The study will throw a spotlight to reveal a range of health hazards and social vulnerability in migrants' life. It will aid for a better inclusion of sugarcane cutter women migrants in India.

Keywords: Sugarcane Cutter Workers, Women Migrants, Women migrant Vulnerability, Health hazards



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1. Introduction:

Sugarcane cutting is a strenuous job where docile, obedient and hardworking seasonal migrants play crucial role in sugarcane harvesting. Every year thousands of women from the asset poor regions migrate to the sugar belt of Maharashtra and Karnataka to cut cane with their husband in the form of *Koyata* owing to the practice of hiring couples. Migrants are working hard from the month of October to April. Women are adding hard work equally with their male partner. They are tying cane bundles weighing 40 to 45 Kgs and loading them in the carts, trucks or trolleys. Domestic violence, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is also common. Overworked, poorly paid and deprived of any rights, migrant cane cutters especially women are most vulnerable and continue to suffer from a number of health and

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security risks. The vulnerable working conditions and demand of hard labour work affects the health of women. Workers deal with multiple health risk situations. The vulnerability of women migrants to discrimination, exploitation and abuse is very high. The exploitation by contractor, vehicle owner, drivers and other men is said to be common. Caste, age, origin and family status are also key facets of their unfortunate life. The study will throw a spotlight to reveal a range of health hazards and social vulnerability in migrants' life. It will aid for a better inclusion of sugarcane cutter women migrants in India.

1.1 Statement of the Problem:

Migrant labour plays key role in sustaining and building India's economy, but his contribution remains unrecognized because of lack of data. Seasonal and temporary migrants are inadequately captured in macro datasets such as the Census and National Sample Survey Organisation. Exclusion of migrants in terms of legal rights, public services and social protection occurred due to regulations and administrative procedures and hence they are often treated as second class citizens. Migrants constitute a 'floating' and invisible population, alternating between source and destination and remaining on the periphery of society. In a continuous state of drift, migrants are left out of the scope of state provisions at both ends - the "source" and the "destination". Social Vulnerability of women lies in her gender dynamics, caste, poverty, social exclusion, dependence, societal culture and responsibilities. Recently the Hindu Business Line report revealed harsh reality in the cane-cutting industry. According to the report, half the seasonal women labour migrants in Beed district of Marathwada region don't have a womb. After giving birth to two or three children, circumstances force her to get uterus removed in order to be able to find work. The labour contractor who enslave them say that menstruation slows them down, and hence insists them to get their ovaries removed so that they can work non-stop for six months.

These migrants enter into contracts for better wages and advance amounts from *muqadams* to undertake major expenditure. Usually they fail to repay whole advance amount due to inadequate season and other uncertainties. In this case workers have been gone through incidents of assault, abduction or custody of wife and daughters by contractors and his agents. It is also inquisitive to know the caste dynamics with her social vulnerability.

In this way women migrants in cane cutting face many constraints including lack of political representation; inadequate housing and lack of formal residency rights; low-paid, insecure or

hazardous work; health hazards, gross exploitation and abuse that arises due to her social status and social vulnerability. To deal with this social problem the study will throw a spotlight to analyze and reveal a range of health hazards and social vulnerability in their life.

1.2 Definitions

- ❖ **Seasonal migration** is a move made for a short period of time with the intention of returning to the place of usual residence (Keshri and Bhagat 2010)
- ❖ **Social vulnerability** refers to potential harm to people. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society. (Blaikie, P., T. Cannon, I. Davis & B)

1.3 Objective of the Study

1. To explore health hazards of sugarcane cutter women migrants
2. To understand social vulnerability of sugarcane cutter women migrants

1.4 An Outline of Sugarcane Cutters

In Sugarcane harvesting the seasonal migrants plays a crucial role. The cane cutters are hired from the socio economically poor part of Maharashtra through informal, contracts in work-pairs called *koyata*, usually comprising of a husband and a wife. 10-15 *koyatas* make a *toli* or cane harvesting team. labour contractors (*Mukadams* or *Thekedars*) negotiate and inform workers about the wage rate and the terms of the work. On the other side a *mukkadam* enters into a written contract with the sugar factory to provide certain number of cane cutters in coming season. Accordingly he receives an advance from the sugar factory. In this practice *mukkadams* earn a commission of 15 to 25 per cent of couple's hiring amount. As stated usually cane cutters are hired as couples or *koyatas* in debt bondage, receiving about 70,000 to 80,000 rupees from *mukkadams* in the month of July and August to confirm their contract of cane cutting in coming season. The migrants are working hard from the month of October to April and struggle to repay the advances taken.

When season starts on the work site, men in a *koyata* cuts through the cane stalk and strips the leaves whereas women look after cleaning, tying of the bundles weighing 40 to 45 kilograms called *moli* and loading of these bundles in the carts, trucks or tractor trolleys. The loading work is extremely exhausting, as women have to climb the stairs set against the

transport vehicles. Accidents and injuries and snake bite incidents are common in this activity.

Every year, thousands of women from the asset poor region migrate to the sugar belt to cut cane with their husband in the form of *Koyata*. Among the seasonally relocating Sugarcane cutters about half of the workers are women and majority of them belong to nomadic tribes, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Further poor families of other backward class and even upper class who are asset-poor and face resource and livelihood deficits are also compelled to leave their own place and choose the hard work of cane cutting. Traditionally lower caste women were accompanying their husband to work as a cane cutters but in the new economic order and deep agrarian crisis in recent time higher class caste like Maratha compelled to migrate due to unseasonal rains, drought, unprecedented farming and changed socio economic parameters. Most of them are marginal farmers and after the harvest of the *Kharif* crops at the end of the rainy season they have no work to do and hence no earnings at village. Hence poverty forces such cane cutters to be a seasonal migrant.

2. Major Findings

2.1 Health Hazards of Woman Migrants

- ✚ The vulnerable working conditions and demand of hard labour affects the health of Woman cane cutters badly.
- ✚ Complains of back pain, joint pain stomach pain is common among women migrants. They are suffering from cut injury, being bitten by a snake and work-related accidents.
- ✚ Workers usually wake up early morning. Women have to bear extra work of preparing meals and other house work before leaving for the work. Adolescent girls have to perform work of fetching water, and looking after other kids in the family and cattle.
- ✚ They live in groups called *toili* where safe drinking water and improved toilet facilities are almost not available.
- ✚ During menstruation women are not able to maintain menstrual hygiene. Majority of them are not using sanitary pads.
- ✚ Lack of menstrual hygiene and insufficient care by them causes pelvic inflammatory diseases, vaginitis and uterine infections of several forms and that may leads to cervical cancer.

2.2 Social Vulnerability of Woman Migrants

Social vulnerability refers to potential harm to people. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society.

2.2.1 Dimensions of Social Vulnerability

- ❖ Level of poverty
- ❖ Lack of or limited access to resources such as information, knowledge and technology
- ❖ Lack of or limited access to political power and representation
- ❖ Lack of or limited social capital including social networks and connections
- ❖ Inadequate beliefs, customs and attitude in response to risk
- ❖ Vulnerable residential
- ❖ Frail and physical limited individuals
- ❖ Lack of or Limited access to critical services such as communication, transportation, power supply, water supply, sanitation, etc.

With respect to above dimensions being a woman, she has to go through following unpleasant incidences at the field:

- ✚ In sugarcane harvesting work conditions are worst and vulnerable especially for the woman workers. It can be highlighted that the vulnerability of women migrants to discrimination, exploitation and abuse is very high.
- ✚ The exploitation of sugarcane cutter by *mukadam*, contractor, relatives, tractor owners, and drivers is common.
- ✚ Their living conditions are not good. They have to live in small and temporary tents made of cane strips and other material with no access to water, electricity or toilets.
- ✚ Scarcity of water and toilets makes women and girls suffer more. They have to relieve themselves in the open places.

- ✚ The wages are paid for one pair (koyata) not individually hence women are not getting their wages in their hands, hence they lose their control over money and that again loses her agency as a worker.
- ✚ Alcoholism is also a serious issue among men. This makes women's life worse. Domestic violence, gender based violence, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is also prevalent. Multiple sexual partners for men can lead to family clashes and further violence.
- ✚ They cannot take benefits of subsequent Maternity Benefit Acts. Pregnant women have to work till the completion of nine months in the field. Hence women workers continue to be deprived of any benefits.
- ✚ Women workers often undergo childbirth on the field without any medical assistance. After delivery they have to immediately rejoin cane cutting work as repayment of advances is the highest priority.

3. Conclusion

Sugarcane harvesting work conditions are worst and vulnerable especially for the woman workers. The vulnerability of women migrants to discrimination, exploitation and abuse is very high. Women migrants in cane cutting face many restrictions in their life. She is facing issues of low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; health hazards, gross exploitation and abuse. Their health is the matter of concern which arises from occupational health hazards, poor living conditions and lack of reasonable health services. Their first priority is the completion of work and repayment of advances and hence she has to work for long hours. This busy schedule ultimately restricts her to take care of health and reach to healthcare services.

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