

Health Rights of Women Migrant Workers in lockdown

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In 2020, the central government's unplanned lockdown left many migrant workers jobless. During the Corona epidemic, the way in which the migrant workers are detained at their workplaces without security of shelter, food, health creates an atmosphere of terrible fear. As jobs and wages stopped, migrant workers started trying to return home to other states. As trains and buses were stopped, people traveled thousands of kilometers on foot. Those skeleton-people walk sleeplessly through the streets with hunger, thirst days and nights. The state seemingly refused to take responsibility.

On the other hand, under the criticism of the oppositions, some migrant-special trains were arranged, where Covid-negative report was required. But many of the migrants could not manage to bear with the cost of that medical procedure. They even could not arrange money for train tickets. As one migrant worker says, "We want to return home desperately. We have no money for train-tickets or medical tests. We only know, if we can return to our own village, we might save our lives through cultivation. We are helpless and thus we are to walk day and night towards our places all along."

Many people died during that time. Women's menstrual health was utterly affected. In this country no time is being spent for the awareness about menstrual hygiene. It is no wonder that menstrual health protection would be neglected in this country where girls have to fight against illegal sex determination methods after conception. Many pregnant women were seen on the roads of Maharashtra and Delhi defying the government order of lockdown and the fear of Corona. Their prenatal nutrition and fundamental protection were disrupted. Many died on the way to home. Even after that the government was silent and no coherent policy was taken. A girl named Jamlo Mokdam died during lockdown. She went to work in a city far away from home to earn money. Leaving school classrooms, friends, playgrounds during adolescence, she became a child labourer. But even then, the ill-conceived lockdown by the country's policy-makers took away the last option of that income. The girl tried to return home on foot with a tired body and mind. And she died a few miles before reaching home. Jamlo Makdam is a prime example of the failure of civil rights stipulated in our country's constitution.

Taking this girl as a model, several logical questions arise in the conception of sociology. What percentage of migrant workers were working illegally in this country during the Corona period? Did she deserved this death? Why the administration failed to take any initiative?

Secondly, why did the state fail to take any special plan for the pregnant migrant workers? Especially when it was important to protect mothers and newborns from infectious diseases like corona.

Thirdly, to what extent the menstrual hygiene was neglected during the girls' long walk to home? When lower-class girls of this country are still not comfortable with using sanitary napkins and use old cloths in the primitive way, how did they bear with their period-days open on the streets during lockdown without enough water and toilets?

Hundreds of girls, who are working as migrant workers in different parts of the country, some in factories, some as road construction workers, some as flyover construction workers, have to still suffer due to inadequate toilets. Many of them cannot use toilet during period-time due to lack of water. Migrant women workers have to face this problems while traveling from one place to another. Even the minimum provision of sanitary napkins is not provided from their workplaces. Female workers suffer from infectious diseases like B.coli due to unscientific and unhealthy provision for urinating and defecating.

There is no awareness camp or regular health checkup to prevent these diseases. Both the central and state governments are apathetic.

Here goes an attempt to highlight the diaries of few women migrant workers in this regard.

Labourer-Scene 1

She is Kalpana Das. Aged 45 years. She is a migrant worker. She is from Sugar mill area of Palashi in Nadia district. It takes a four and a half hour train journey from Kolkata to reach there. Kalpana is married. she dreamed of a happy family with children and husband. But there is a big difference between reality and dream. The family cannot manage to earn by working as daily labourer. Her elder son stays in the village and works as a harvester on other people's land. Kalpana had to move to another state as a migrant worker with her younger son and husband a few years ago. She reached a overpopulated area called Chakrapur near Gurgaon to earn money.

At present Kalpana is there only. She works as a housemaid for four high-society families living in high-rises in affluent areas of Delhi. The height of the sky from the ground of her reality and the same from the roof of those multi-storied flat is not the same. Hence, her appointers cannot even imagine what makes Kalpana to choose the life of a migrant worker. From the other side of the phone, Kalpana has said in very weak voice, "I don't understand much, I am illiterate. If you want to know about me, please have a talk to my son. Actually, I am confused whether I could manage to place before you properly about my life-journey. It would be better if you know about me and my work from my son. He can depict the picture." But the thing is that she knows well the value of literacy which she failed to achieve. She is much embarrassed for her illiteracy. Who can say, given the proper financial and social environment she could have been one of those multi-storied houses!

Kalpana said, "I wash dishes, sweep and wash clothes in people's homes. My younger son got married. They have had a baby few days before. In this condition his wife cannot go outside and earn. So I have had to take the total responsibility of the family. I have had to take few more assignments in some houses."

Kalpana earns eight thousand rupees a month only. Now she works in four houses. And the money he earns ends up paying house rent. The the rest of the costs for foods and others are being managed by her husband and son's hard attempts as migrant workers.

She does not get much leisure at work. Around the clock, one after another work arises before her. Though she works for an air-conditioned flat, she sweats washing dishes in the hot kitchen. She has to walk a long way to reach her workplace on scorching day or rainy weather. She cannot help but going to workplace even if the weather be bad. She starts with washing dishes, then cleaning the house and washing clothes with her skillful hands. After that, it is time to run towards her next destination, another house and the same routine continues.

Kalpana gets down every months due to abdominal pain during menstruation for three to four days. But nobody provides with leave. Her show must go on. Practically, in this country there is still no fixed leave for girls during their menstruation in public or private organised workplaces. In that case, it is absurd to expect menstrual leave for girls in unorganised workplaces of migrant workers. Kalpana doesn't know that much. She only knows that maids and domestic helps are fired if they want leave. However, in this

case, this migrant worker finds some logics if her appointers get angry. She said, "Sometimes I take leave when I am severely ill. But as those sirs and madams also work in the office, they get into huge trouble if I skip. Nobody likes this type of absence from work. How can I blame them!"

Kalpana has to buy sanitary napkins during periods. It costs a lot per month. But she does not want to use clothes or rags as before. Kalpana changed the habit of using unclean clothes and rags after suffering from a terrible infection. Kalpana said over the phone from her home in Delhi, "if poor girls like us are given free sanitary napkins by the government, it will be very helpful." She adds, "almost all of what I earn in a month is spent on house rent and electricity bills. After that, I have to depend on husband and son to run the family. On the other hand, when menstruating, I have to buy one packet of sanitary pads for myself and another packet for my son's wife from the medicine store."

But Kalpana has no clear idea about menstrual hygiene. She has never had the experience of attending any awareness camp or health camp about the physical difficulties or probable damage caused by profuse bleeding.

What does she do if her menstruation starts at workplace? Kalpana says, "I ask for pads from the female members of that house. Some provide with that. Actually, this is not a problem where I am working for years. But in new houses I feel ashamed to ask for sanitary napkins. In that case I usually prefer to go outside and buy napkins from store."

Another serious problem is toilet. Kalpana says, in her present multi-storied workplaces she has the permission to use toilets. Besides, in some houses, there are separate toilets for domestic helps. But in many small houses there is no such provision. There domestic helps like her have to hold their urine for a long time. Kalpana has had that experience while working in small houses.

However, this migrant worker is more concerned with hunger rather than disease, suffering or pain. And Kalpana goes to work everyday without thinking too much about her body. If needed, she even hold her urine and finish the job.

This is a little description of how the health issues of women workers are compromised. But their situation at home is equally bad. In the rented house where Kalpana lives, she has to constantly face the problem of toilet. Migrant workers live in that densely populated area of Delhi. People come there from far away to earn money. After their daylong work they return and spend night in those rented small houses. Those houses are like small-shaped matchboxes. In that colony-type area four to five people live in one such small house. Only one toilet is allotted for three rented houses. Kalpana says that before leaving for work in the morning, there was a long queue in front of the toilet. Men can urinate outside, but women do not have that privilege. Women have to sit down and wait for the toilet to be empty. Napkin changing during menstruation days is another problem. Prolonged use of a napkin often leads to bacterial infection from menstrual blood. Girls suffer from various female problems like lower abdominal pain, frequent urination problems, urinary tract infection etc. Moreover, the inadequacy of latrines leads to delayed urination for women. This type of pressure on the excretory system can lead to kidney problems later. However, there is no campaign at government level or health camp for general awareness on these issues.

Here the question arises, why is the government not taking a more vigorous promotion program on menstrual hygiene? Why the health care of migrant women workers is so neglected when a large proportion of women in this country are suffering from or dying from cervical cancer?

She is Seema Pal (Name Changed). She is from a remote village of Murshidabad. Aged around 50. Currently she is living in Kerala. Seema works as a construction worker there.

She says, she cannot do heavy work anymore. Her physic fails to do so. At one time when she came into a new family after marriage, she never asked anybody to help her in housework. She herself used to carry the heavy farming materials to the field, to the workplace. But with her age, ability to work is being decreased. She is now weak in her strength of hands and feet. However, despite her age increased, secure income does not. And with her age the fear of loosing job has increased to a great extent. She roams around from one contractor to another to get work permits. She has to bear even with lesser salary. She dares to ask for higher amount keeping in mind the chances of retrenchment. Therefore, hardly she gets solace even by working hard.

Through several meetings and conversations, the infinite darkness around Seema's world is also manifested. When she was young she used to suffer from insecurity in the unfamiliar streets and new city. In some sites, she had to work with unknown men. Sometimes, when it was late at night, walking through the empty area and returning home from work, she used to feel utmost fear. But the urge of stomach does not stop. That made her roam from one state to another all alone to earn money. Seema knew that asking her husband to take her back to her slum is a mere luxury. Her laborer husband was then working two more hours to earn some more money. At that time no one was worried about her. For example, when this girl miscarried while carrying bricks, wood and stones on her head, nobody did stand beside her. She somehow took herself to the nearby government hospital alone to stop the bleeding. She never conceived again. Her husband did not want Seema to have children. Because, a pregnancy means less earnings for a long time. Her husband and the contractor thought that a money-making machine is much more worthy than a child-producing machine.

Let's come back to the present day. Seema now works as a migrant worker. Her husband died two years ago. She has no feelings for her own village house now. Or even if she has some, she decides to stay at Kerala to earn money. She said that since she was working as a construction worker, her skins of hands and feet had hardened. She feels unbearable pain in her neck, waist. However, her work must go on. She never had a health checkup arranged by any contractor or company owner. During lockdown, her work stopped and she was without earnings. Then she had to return to Murshidabad. As Corona partially subsided, she again went to Kerala to join work. Her husband died due to corona infection. Corona affected Seema too. Still she is having breathing problems. But she has no money for proper treatment. She only knows, as long as she lives, she has to work like this. She has to carry bricks, stones, cement and sand. Strong concrete houses would raise their heads, but Seema's decaying body and mind would remain covered in darkness.

Labourer-Scene 3

A migrant worker's family was stuck in a state with their 21-day-old son in the 2020, at the time of lockdown. After lot of struggle and hard work, the woman who gave birth to her child managed to return to West Bengal with her newly born son. But her health as a new mother became completely devastated.

At that time, her husband was contacted over phone. He urged for some Horlicks for their newborn child so that they can feed the baby. That family did not have money to buy milk.

When contacted in July 2020, it was known that Hasan Mallik, a resident of Tarkeshwar Goeshpur village, was detained in Delhi's Mandigaon for three and a half months. His wife Sabina Yasmin, their

eleven-year-old son and that twenty-one-day-old newborn were also with him. Courtesy goes to lockdown and labor policies of the country.

Hasan is a migrant worker from Bengal who went to work in Delhi in search of livelihood. He supports his family by doing embroidery work for so many years. But from March of that year, his income stopped completely. The landlord waived the rent for two months for the house he rented on the hill area. But when the unlock phase started, the landlord started asking for rent. He was even threatened to be evicted with his family along with the newborn child. Hasan could not even complain to the local administration as he is a Muslim and his Hindu landlord was his local guardian and social protector. Hasan was scared after the Delhi violence. He did not want to get involved in any new trouble. What he did was despite not having enough money to feed his family, he somehow arranged some 1500 rupees and paid the rent.

The problem started from the time the lockdown was announced. Since then, the family has seen no end to the problems. Hasan says that he has been traveling to Delhi for several years to do embroidery work. Meanwhile he took his pregnant wife and son with him. In the meantime, they got stuck in lockdown. Then they had no earnings, no money. In that condition, taking care of his pregnant wife was beyond his imagination. He had to think only how to arrange for daily food.

At that time Hasan came in contact with Devjit Tagore, a member of a youth organization working with migrant workers called 'Quarantine Student Youth Network' in Kolkata. He primarily arranged 'ration' for the family. Despite his lots of sufferings, Hasan never became selfish. He did not forget the helplessness of the other migrant workers. When Devjit sent him money, he was ashamed and said, "People are not getting even rice and pulses and I am asking for Horlicks and fruits! Please don't mind! Actually I am failing to take care of my wife!"

After this, Hasan booked tickets for the Shramik Special train to return home on June 15. But just before the return-date, his wife Sabina went into labor pain and gave birth to their son in a hospital. After that, he had to cancel his plan to return home with his newly born child and physically weak wife. But he didn't even have the money to buy a bottle of milk for the newborn. Again, with the help of Devjit, mosquito nets and clothes were arranged for their child.

Meanwhile, the company that Hasan and his embroidery factory contractor were working for in Delhi, closed their entire office as one worker got covid-infected. Workers were quarantined. As a result, the contractor faced problem to run the work due to fund crisis. Almost 60,000 rupees remained due for the rent of the embroidery factory. In the meantime, not getting money from the market, the contractor also left the area with outstanding debts. Before leaving, he assured Hasan that he would open the factory again if he gets money from the organization's office. But Hassan did not know exactly when it would work.

Hasan told that the contractor is supposed to return his money also. It is around twenty thousand seven hundred rupees. But there is no hope of getting that money. Meanwhile, the newborn's baby got cold and cough. But Hasan was not in a condition to take him to hospital. They stayed within the house to avoid corona infection. He said on the phone from Delhi in a bitter voice, "I can't take it anymore! Something must turn up! Is there any possibility?"

Hasan did not forget to inform that a new member came to their family. Out of gratitude, he informed "I have had a son, Jasimuddin Mallik. I didn't inform others still. Wanted to let you know first!"

There is no discussion in this country about their helplessness and how Hasan's wife Sabina suffered during pregnancy and childbirth. But from the sociological point of view, the question ought to arise. Why there is no state-coordinated policy for women migrant workers?

Labourer-Scene 4

This is about a migrant worker family living in Sector Five of Haryana. A family of four members including two minors. A twelve-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl. Both their mother and father are migrant workers. To provide food to children, the couple left their home and moved to other state. Basically they are residents of a remote village in West Bengal's Nadia district. They do have ration card of the same locality. Their ration cards are being used by the other members of the family. But two of the cards are not functioning as they failed to link them with Aadhaar. Those ration cards are meaningless to them. Mofizur Sheikh is the head of the family. He is around 35 years. Mofizur used to clean fountains in an amusement park until some days before Kali Puja. But he is ill-fated. Being infected with dengue he had to be on leave and as a result he lost his job. Lying on the bed, Mofizur said in a weak voice that the cost of his treatment and medicine is too high to bear with and his unemployment has put his wife Pakirabibi in trouble.

Now let us introduce Pakirabibi. Pakira is a skinny young woman of 25. When asked 'How are you?', the quick reply comes-- 'I am fine.' Pakira is from another district of West Bengal. Leaving her school life unfinished, Pakira got married at a young age and moved to her in-laws' house in other village. There, though her husband used to earn a little, she at least could stay at home. Her routine was cooking, housework, raising children. She had to take the responsibility of child when she herself was a teenager. But still Pakira was happy. With the wages earned by her husband she could manage somehow their lives. But with time number of heads gradually increased in their family which consisted of Mofizur's brothers and sisters, their children, elderly parents and their own children. With time it has become impossible to run the whole family with that little wages. As a result, one day husband and wife decided to move to other state. In search of work, they left their home and reached a completely unknown and uncertain destination. In Haryana they took a cheap rental house in slum area. After that, Mofizur joined the amusement park as a worker. All these happened merely a year ago. Mofizur got the job with the wage of ten thousand rupees a month. But it was not easy to run a family with that little money in a new place. After paying house rent of 3,500 rupees they were to pay for electricity and water too. And they had to run the family at the same time. As a result, Mofizur's wife Pakira was also turned into a migrant worker.

Pakira is a clear example of how a rural girl gradually transforms into a migrant worker due to the indifference of the state.

At present, Pakiras alone runs their family with her own earnings. He earns five thousand rupees by doing cleaning and cooking in two houses.

She has to walk for 30 minutes when going to workplace every day and another 30-minute walk when returning home. She says, "It is very difficult to walk that long way. Apart from that all is okay, Didi!"

But what makes Pakira to walk everyday? The reason is simple. There is no bus service on that road. Though autorikswa is available, but it costs fifty rupees for one turn. If she travels by auto, it would cost hundred rupees per day which Pakira fails to bear with. She is not in a position to spend almost all her earnings for auto-journey. Hence, Pakira walks all along whether her body permits or not.

How Pakira manages in the days of her menstruation? She says, she takes a leave from work on the first day as she feels tremendous pain. But on the second or third day she has to join work even if she has 'heavy flow' or pain. Because taking leave for more than one day is not allowed. In that case, she might lose her job. No high-rise building is that benevolent to stand beside those Pakiras. And it is very easy to replace her as there is no dearth of female workers in that area and the cost of labor is also very low. The work of domestic help is through and through cheap and vulnerable.

The point of labor rights that social and state policy makers love to discuss in the public and private sectors is limited to the organized sector only. Labor rights in the unorganized sector are only mentioned in sociology textbooks. It has no practical implementation. There is no long 'sick leave' and no 'menstrual leave' for female migrant workers. The issue of menstrual leave is hotly debated in Kerala. A school has been granting such leave since 1912. The Government of India has been thinking of formulating a policy in this regard. But as a whole nothing such has been yet implemented. It is no wonder that nothing would turn up in near future to protect workers of unorganized sector.

But Pakira is optimistic. She thinks that she could have managed the matter by working for one or two new houses. Then she could go to workplace on sick days by auto. It would add more work pressure for sure but at least she could avoid walking in her painful days. But the total situation has changed a few days ago. Suddenly Mofizur has become ill and lost his job. Sometimes Pakira thinks, she could have managed all those if they don't have any children.

Pakira says that when she lived in Nadia of West Bengal, she used to get boiled eggs from the Anganwadi center during her pregnancy. Half of an egg-- even after childbirth, she used to get it for several days. There one egg used to be divided between two pregnant women. This is what the Government can provide for the nutrition of an expectant mother. This is the reality. While the nutrition of a newborn depends on breast milk, mother's nutrition is being utterly compromised.

The question ought to arise, why should nutrition of a pregnant woman and the same of a child be given so little priority in the consideration of state policy makers? Why there is no social security scheme to protect the health of pregnant women and children? Especially, for those women who work as migrant workers, whose manual labor is heavy? They do not have a regular supply of nutrients in their diet because they cannot afford. A needy mother is only able to provide her child with breast milk for six months. But practically the child is constantly being deprived of nutrition just because the mother herself is lacking nutrition.

Pakira says, "In Bengal at least I used to get half of an egg daily. At that time, before and after childbirth, the sisters of Ashakormi group would come and give me that. But here in this unknown place this is just beyond dream!"

References----

*Menstrual leave :

Note 1

Nearly 100 years ago, in the 1920s and 30s, Soviet Russia relieved menstruating women from paid labour to safeguard their reproductive health, thus originating the idea of formal menstrual leave policy. In the late 1920s, labour unions in Japan popularised the concept, subsequently codified in Japanese Law in 1947. Japan's menstrual leave policy has stood for more than 70 years now, and it isn't the only country in

Asia to have such a policy. In South Korea, period leave was implemented in 1953. Certain regions, businesses, and provinces are rapidly enacting menstrual leave laws in China that include a variety of privileges. Taiwan, Indonesia, Zambia are a few more countries that recognise menstrual leave and is a part of their employee leave policy.

In, india, Ninong Ering, a former Member of Parliament in the Lok Sabha from Arunachal Pradesh, introduced the Menstruation Benefit Bill, a private member's bill, in 2017 to provide women working in public and private sectors with two days of paid menstruation leave each month. The bill triggered a debate.

However, there have been some landmarks in this domain previous to Ering's bill. Since 1992, the Bihar government has granted two days of period leave to female employees. Women can choose which two days of the month they want to work without having to justify their choice. In the corporate world, companies like Zomato, Mathrubhumi (Malayalam News Channel), Wet and Dry (New Delhi based organisation) have introduced the menstrual leave policy in their organisations. Some other companies have introduced working from home for their employees.

(Courtesy : Deccan herald/ opinion / The case for a menstrual leave policy: may 18, 2022)

Note 2

The Government Girls School in Tripunithura, located in the erstwhile princely state of Cochin (present Ernakulam district), had in 1912 allowed students to take 'period leave' during the time of their annual examination and permitted them to write it later.

According to a book "Kerala in the 19th Century", written by historian P Bhaskaranunni, the head-teacher of the school had approached the higher-ups and requested granting of leave as women teachers and students were normally absent during the time. Published by the state-run Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 1988, the book is considered to be an authentic study on various aspects of the southern state in terms of lifestyle, ritual practises, caste and communities, family set-up, education, agriculture, temples and administration during the 19th and early 20th century.

(Courtesy: The Economics Times / Ahead of its time! This Kerala school granted menstrual leave to students way back in 1912: Aug20, 2017.)

Note 3:

Union Minister for Women and Child Development Smriti Irani has said the Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules, 1972, applicable to Central government employees, do not have provisions for menstrual leave, and currently there is no proposal being examined to include such leave in the rules.

(Courtesy : The Hindu/ news/ july 29, 2022)

*Menstrual hygiene

Note 4:

National Family Health Survey 2015-2016 estimates that of the 336 million menstruating women in India about 121 million (roughly 36 percent) women are using sanitary napkins, locally or commercially produced.

(courtesy: www.swacchiindia.ndtv.com / may 28, 2019)

Note 5:

Sanitary napkins were not included as essential products when the lockdown was first announced. It was only after an uproar by NGOs and activists that union minister Smriti Irani clarified their inclusion. This announcement came after a gap of around 21-30 days, and there still continued to be an irregular supply of sanitary napkins for more than 2.5 months - even longer in rural areas.

(courtesy: www.thequint.com/ 12 February, 2021)

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