

## Gendered Migration in India: Exploring the Challenges and Human Rights Issues Faced by Female Migrant Workers in Perumbavoor, Ernakulam District, Kerala



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**ABSTRACT:** Most studies on inter-state migrant workers in Kerala focus on male migrants arriving in the state. Kerala began to receive migrant workers in 1950. There has been a significant shift in it since 1990. From the 1960s to the 1990s, migrant workers came to Kerala from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. During those times, women came to Kerala along with men. After the 1990s, migration from Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Haryana gained momentum. Many women have moved to Kerala since 2000, as opposed to male migrants from 1990 to 2000.

Many human rights issues face migrant women in Kerala, including their workplaces, lifestyles, job searches, and travel. The consequences of not getting significant health interventions and being harassed at work are not well known in society. A study of migrant women begins in the public space, where they are not considered citizens but as objects of utility. My research revealed 516,000 migrant women in Kerala, based on a government document obtained through RTI. There are 25000 female migrant workers among them. It is estimated that around 34 lakh migrant workers work in Kerala, according to the Kerala Planning Board's 2021 report. Out of that, 20% of women work in many workplaces and enterprises in Kerala.

According to surveys and a government assessment, Kerala's Ernakulam district has the highest concentration of migrant women workers. The female migrant workers in the Perumbavoor one of the cities of the Ernakulam district are the subject of this study. Female workers who work in plywood, bricks, baji, tailoring, pan shops, plastic manufacturing, textile manufacturing, and other industrial units are the subject of this study. Female migrant workers are personally met and interviewed during fieldwork to obtain data. For this study, qualitative ethnographic research methodology is employed.

The findings of this study suggest the government's policy-making for social welfare, social security, job security, the prevention of sexual violence, and making sure that female migrants in Kerala receive equal pay for equal work. This study is being conducted with the human rights of women migrant workers in Kerala foremost in mind. Information is being directly collected from migrant women workers, labour department health department government representatives, trade union members, NGO representatives, etc.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminisation of Labour, Women Migration, Intersectionality, Human Rights, Kerala.

### ARTICLE METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collection conducted among various government officials, NGO workers, social workers, women migrant workers, and political trade unions during a field visit from October 2022 to August 2023 funded by the Science and Engineering Research Board project (SERB – CRG/2021/004314) on "*Effect of a social institution and technological interventions on access to healthcare among interstate migrant labourers in Kerala.*" First-hand data was collected through inspections, investigations, and a structured approach by visiting direct sites in the Perumbavoor area of Ernakulam district of Kerala using local field visit methodology. Ernakulam district has been marked in the government records as the place with the highest number of female migrant workers in Kerala. Perumbavoor area is known as the hub of migrant workers in Ernakulam district. In the Perumbavoor area, the living conditions of the migrant workers were assessed, and direct visits were made to their accommodation places, direct visits to their work areas to learn and understand the labour issues, and further in-depth interviews were conducted to inquire about their health, food, rest, and wages. During the eleven months of the field visit, Perumbavoor Town, Bengali Market, Vallam, Gandhi Bazar, Kantantara, Allapra, Vengola, Valayancharangara, Pohnassery, Thandekkad, where migrant workers live, visited the labour camps, construction sites, manufacturing units, and visits among women living alone and with families. Data collection was done by engaging in long conversations. In-depth interviews, observations, information from written documents,

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RTI, and social media content have been utilized for data collection. Ethical research consent was obtained from the migrant women workers as this was a study among women, and an affidavit was given accordingly that their data would not be used for any purpose other than the study. The names of the persons mentioned in the case study in these articles are not original. Consent was not obtained at the time of the survey to use the original names of the individuals.

### **Ethical Care of Migrant Women Workers: in Global Perspective**

Interventions by International Human Rights Organizations regarding Migration and Displacement have been established precisely since the 1990s. They are ensuring the protection of the human rights and welfare of these migrants in the context of international organizations and their legal frameworks. However, while international organizations are essential in addressing migration-related issues through frameworks, their legal guidelines may differ.<sup>1</sup> It examines the role of international organizations and their legal frameworks in the ethical management of transnational women migrants and the codification of legal proposals developed at the global level.

International organizations such as the United Nations are pressured to adopt and implement international human rights standards and legal proposals by their member states. International Human Rights Standards are such established codes of principles. These standards include principles related to migrants' rights, non-discrimination and gender equality. The country should be discussed in the context of inter-state migrants through the norms related to international migration. Organizations like the UN emphasize the importance of respecting and protecting the human rights of all migrants, regardless of gender. The labour rights violations faced by women migrant workers in Kerala, who are kept away from humanitarian aid, should also be discussed.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an important international legal instrument focusing on women's rights, including migrants. It calls for eliminating discrimination against women of all kinds and addressing issues related to migration, labour and human trafficking. International organizations are working to ensure that migrant women's rights are protected under CEDAW, but various agencies are coordinating this work internationally. Monitoring the activities of such organizations within the country on the problems of inter-state migrant workers is often seen as a failure. It is up to individual agencies within each country to find specific groups that engage women in sex work and to end the modern slave trade. An inter-state immigration system that is not legal and everyone travels like tourists and engages in undocumented employment fails to recreate such international patterns within the country.

It emphasizes that the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which is not fully recognized and implemented, protects them from exploitation, health care and other fundamental rights. Advocating only through concrete measures at the international level, this manual indicates a democratic, ethical approach to work. The International Labor Organization (ILO) sets international labour standards and promotes decent work for all, including migrant workers. These standards cover labour rights, occupational health and safety, and protection from exploitation. At the international level, the ILO does much work to oppose the modern slave trade. Legal protection and equality are guaranteed to give dignity to women. However, the situation of various forms of neglect faced by women over the centuries is becoming widespread at the international, national and regional levels. The Interstate Migrant Labor Act 1979 has not undergone any timely changes even after forty years. International approaches to change remain the norm.

The United Nations (UN) developed the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in 1998, which guide the rights and protection of IDPs, including issues related to humanitarian assistance, non-discrimination, property rights and freedom of movement. Whether these guidelines are effectively implemented within the country is questionable. Displacements can be traced to many causes, but the pin is one of the leading causes. An example is the news of people fleeing their land due to caste, community and political issues. From the fieldwork, it has been understood that there is an increase in the number of migrant workers who want to settle in Kerala. Internal conflicts, people displaced due to government measures, people who escape political riots, and people who leave the area due to fear of caste bans after love marriages all come to internal displacement. They migrate to Kerala, where social inequality is less.

The Global Compact on Migration (GCM) calls for safe and regular migration within and outside countries. Better working conditions should lead to an increase in the labour force. Only if such a situation exists within the country can it be ensured that the rights and welfare of migrant women are respected. The neglect of migrant workers in national legal codes focusing on gender equality and non-discrimination must end.

### **Women Migration in India on Contemporary Literature**

In inter-state migration in India, there is a socio-academic situation where women's migration is hidden, and only male migration is brought under the meaning of 'migration'. If we look at the history of migration over the decades, women leave their place of origin as much as men, whether international or intra-national. Marriage is the main reason for women's migration. Irrespective of rural-urban differences, women migrate from their place of birth to another place after marriage. The 2011 census indicates that the most significant number of women are displaced through this process of internal migration. During my fieldwork, I learned that during migrations within India, women come to Kerala alone in search of work. Gender migration goes beyond the push and pull factor

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(Sharpe 2011)<sup>ii</sup>. Studies also suggest that women who migrate searching for work find the distance a manageable factor. Although many reasons can be found for women's migration within the country, it is indicated that women migrate along with friends, family members, and relatives and that there are specific patterns for such children (Agarwal 2006)<sup>iii</sup>. Irudaya Rajan (2015)<sup>iv</sup> suggests that domestic work availability and marriage are the reasons for female migration. Gender and caste are interconnected in migration and economics. He adds that gender migration within India is a changing factor of internal migration.

Between November 2016 and May 2017, Binoy Peter and Vishnu Narendran<sup>v</sup>, both of whom have advanced degrees in migration studies and speak at least four Indian languages, including Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, and Malayalam, travelled over 11,500 km across 14 districts to collect data from nearly 900 key informants. 2016-2017, 194 districts across 25 Indian states/Union Territories contributed to the study. More than four-fifths of these districts belong to 8 Indian states – Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam. People from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, women, and minority communities from far-off regions seem to constitute the majority of the workforce in Kerala (Narendran and Peter 2017). A research article published by Prasad Ravikumar (2017)<sup>vi</sup> exposes the government's neglect of migrant women workers in Kerala. He talks in detail about pay discrimination in the workplace, women, their overtime work, and their physical discomfort. He has written this article based on the field visit of Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district. A research article published by Navas M. Khader and KM Sudhakaran (2022)<sup>vii</sup> exposes the categorization of women migrant workers arriving in Kerala and their workplace exploitation. The article also contains suggestions for solving the health problems of women workers and fundamental problems related to their work.

### **Concept of Intersectionality**

The concept of intersectionality should be contrasted with migrant women workers. Because there is a different approach to migrant women's jobs in Kerala based on region, language, caste, and colour. Women from Bengal live more self-sufficiently, while women from Assam experience bondage, a form of modern slavery. A prominent American scholar, Kimberley Crenshaw, introduced this concept through her scholarly work and writings in the late 1980s. Kimberley Crenshaw is often credited with pioneering the concept of intersectionality, which has since become a foundational concept in critical race theory and feminist scholarship.

Kimberley Crenshaw has argued that understanding the unique challenges faced by Black women requires recognizing the intersection of their multiple identities. She articulates the concept and emphasizes its importance in addressing the legal and social experiences of Black women in her 1989 article<sup>viii</sup> "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," which is one of Crenshaw's most influential writings on intersectionality. This situation can work differently if we examine the women who migrate. Women's migration is shaped by their experiences and multiple factors of class, caste, religion, and gender. The opportunities and denial of opportunities created by these various factors highlight the intersectional approach of women migrant workers. Intersectionality is a concept developed through an understanding of feminist theory and critical theory to understand how identities are formed in society, the mechanisms that suppress such identities, and the mechanisms that interact with them to create experiences in an individual.

Crenshaw's work on intersectionality arose from the observation that existing legal and feminist frameworks did not adequately address the experiences of Black women who faced discrimination based solely on gender or race. These migrant women's experiences create social identities that vary according to the demographic situation of their place of migration, caste, religion and economic status. The thoughts of a woman who migrates from a city will differ from those of a woman who comes as a representative of a low caste or marginalized society and their social levels. Then, there will be multiple social identities among the migrant women. Intersectionality has become a foundational framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity, privilege, and oppression intersect and shape individuals' experiences in complex and nuanced ways.

Women workers suffer the most from the discrimination that identities create. Even if lower caste tribals or Dalits try to enable better facilities through migration, their identity hinders their migratory development. Such incidents make women very vulnerable. While the migration process is easy and successful for women with privileged identities, marginalized women face barriers to access to education, employment, and health care, and their migration process places them at a lower level than upper-class women and creates opportunity denial. One condition can be seen as the intersectionality of labour market segmentation.

### **Feminization of Labour**

American feminist economist and scholar Heidi Hartman coined the "feminization of labour"<sup>ix</sup> concept. According to the 2011 Census of India, the number of male migrant workers in the labour force increased from 2001 to 2011 at 3.9 million. However, the increase in female migration during the same period was 4.7 million. That means there is a significant change in the labour force in the country. Heidi Hartman first introduced the feminization of labour in the 1980s to describe these changing dynamics of the workforce, specifically to understand women's increasing participation in the workforce, including entry into jobs and traditionally male-dominated fields.

Migrant women workers do not receive the same treatment as male workers. Increases in the changing nature of employment are not seen among female migrant workers. On the other hand, wage inequality and occupational segregation are increasing, and women are being forced to bear the double burden of work and family responsibilities. Along with this, women are generally ignored

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in the labour market, labelled as weak, and called to work for low wages. Gender relations, family structures, and public policy increasingly adopt male-centred dimensions, denying women equal opportunity. While such denial of justice can be seen in low-skilled migrant workers, Heidi Hartman's work emphasizes that women's increased participation in paid employment through higher education is a significant social and economic change.

Research and writings on the feminization of work have influenced feminist economics and gender studies, with Heidi Hartman's work questioning the social conditions that marginalize women in the workplace based on gender, providing an understanding of the complexities of women's economic disparities and the need for policies that address gender-based inequalities in the workplace. Heidi Hartman's observations on the general condition of migrant women workers in Kerala are convincing in my fieldwork. Women migrant workers in Kerala face employment discrimination, wage inequality, and poor living conditions.

### **Interstate Women Migration in India**

Women have a respectable position in Indian society per the constitution, but inequality in women's employment still exists today. The approach of classifying women according to the difference in jobs is ingrained in low-skilled workers. Therefore, the situation of migrant women workers in India remains poor in the labour market. Women are in high demand in the labour market because they are willing to work for any wage and are as organized and submissive as other male workers. This results in the feminization of labour and the feminization of labour migration.

Changes in the labour market in India have varied dramatically about migration. Changes in rural-urban migration are closely related to changes in the labour market. Women's migration needs to be discussed in two ways: labour migration and family migration. Labour migration is primarily economic. Over the past 15 years, this economic migration has been more pronounced among women. Through fieldwork in the villages of Kerala, I am convinced that the migration of women to different states of India has contributed significantly to changes in rural areas and their wealth system. Among the essential reasons for women's migration, the economy is the pull factor, while marriage is the push factor.

In the same way, the diversity of the profession and the changes in its structure make it impossible for women to reach all fields. Employment opportunities for female migrant workers are very different from those for male labourers, and some remain inaccessible today. The field visit revealed that women do not get better wages or employment opportunities in the agricultural sector compared to men in increasing productivity in the agricultural sector. Today's women's migration proceeds from the background of the expansion of women's families through money and other financial resources from women who migrated when the labour migration of women in India was not accepted. Rural and urban-to-urban migration reflect economic changes in their place of origin. Such changes encourage occupational migration among women. While there are many important reasons for migration, men and women are active today who migrate to different corners of the country in search of peaceful work and living conditions from a place full of caste, religion, and political problems. Many studies point to a background in which money plays a crucial role in the survival of families, and the earning of this money becomes male-cantered, thus deviating from the male-cantered status quo and women taking on the task of remittances and large migration from the north-eastern states of India. Although all such studies talk about women's migration, the fact is that there are no studies that are important to understand or address the gender issues faced by women in this migration.

Women in the cities of Asia migration and urban adaptation (1984)<sup>x</sup> defined women's migration in three ways. The first of which is described as autonomous female migration. Middle and upper-middle-class women migrate to cities to improve their educational qualifications and obtain suitable employment to maintain their social status. It is migration based on socio-economic advancement. Those lower in education also reach their business ventures through such migration. The second method is called relay migration. It is a practice of keeping each member in a place like bonded labour to increase family income. It is a process in which the women initially employed in the house are left to do the same job after their marriage, and another family member will continue the same job. The third method is in which all the family members migrate together to another place. This is how the wife goes to her husband's place of work to look for job opportunities. Family migration is becoming more common among agricultural labourers with no land or other assets to fall back on in times of crisis. This is the history of early Tamil migration in Kerala. Moreover, male dominance among the poorest groups is generally more interdependent with women's contributions and marriage practices. Such groups migrate to urban areas in family units for employment opportunities for both.

A look at historical trends in migration in India reveals the selective migration of men in the 1970s and 1980s, family migration (women also joined the migration stream without staying in villages), and independent female migration in the 1990s and late 1990s: male selective, family migration and response to employment opportunities in semi-urban and urban areas. In South Asia, a shift in migration patterns has been observed since the early 1990s, as the movement of a female migrant worker was rare and associated with a stigmatized status. Economic liberalization, particularly trade liberalization in India, has created gender-specific employment requirements, where women take advantage of new-found opportunities in groups or with families (Shanti, 1991)<sup>xi</sup>. In the work of P. Nirmalya (2022)<sup>xii</sup>, it is said that it is challenging to take figures on the number of migrant women workers in India and that the activities for women migrant workers should be seen as two in terms of employment and migration. However, it is unfortunate that extensive national-level surveys fail to capture the reality of female migration. As a result, invisible women are still treated as



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secondary earners in the official data system. As a result, no policy measures are proposed to alleviate the suffering of these migrant women who do not even have basic facilities at their destination. In the case of women, the reason for permanent migration is related to marriage. The woman may have worked before marriage and intends to marry a city dweller to increase her employment prospects, but this needs to be noticed. Also, in the Indian cultural context, it is inappropriate for a woman to emphasize her economic role, and women's jobs are not even recognized as 'work' if they are an extension of domestic tasks. In associational migration, where men and women migrate together, questions such as whether or not women's employment was counted at the time of migration are not raised in the sample population, so it is difficult to identify 'autonomous female migrants'. Despite these shortcomings, in the absence of any other data on migration, one has to rely on the Census and NSSO, two data sources for migration.

In the National Sample Survey Office's Periodic Labor Force Survey from July 2020 to June 2021, it has been reported that female migration is the highest in rural-urban areas. More than half of the sample migrated to rural areas, while women migrated to urban areas as temporary visitors. According to the report, the migration ratio in rural areas is 26.5 per cent. Of the total rural migration, 48.0% were women, and 5.9% were men. Out of the total 34.9% urban migration, 47.8% of women and 22.5% of men are recorded as migrants. In a study conducted by PLF on why women migrate to India, 86.8% of women are married. 7.3% of migration occurs through the migration of women who are the earning members of the family. According to the report, 8% of women migrated from their state due to problems at home, and 7% of women migrated from their origin state for good jobs. They are migrants but not recognized as migrant workers.

### Invisible Workforce in Kerala

The phenomenon of female migration to the Indian state of Kerala has been a subject of significant discussion and research in recent years. Drawing insights from the study *Gender and Livelihood Patterns in the Context of Migrant Women Laborers in Kerala* (2022) explores the historical roots of female migration to Kerala, the changing trends in migration, the various avenues of migration, and the labour sectors that employ these women. The roots of female migration to Kerala can be traced back to Tamil Nadu, where the first wave of migrant women originated. Initially, it was common for these women to migrate along with their husbands. Agriculture was the primary driving force behind this migration, which presented job opportunities for both men and women. Over time, the nature of migration evolved, expanding to include work in households and plantations. This migration trend continues today, with generations of Tamil migrants residing in Kerala's hilly regions. As per the 2011 census, Kerala had a population of 33.4 million, with 2.2 million migrant workers.

The 2011 census report highlighted a significant shift in migration patterns. Post-1990, and particularly after 2000, migrants predominantly hailed from states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. This departed from the earlier migration trend, primarily from South Indian states. Understanding these shifting patterns is crucial to unravel the dynamics of female migration to Kerala.

The *Gender and Livelihood Patterns in the Context of Migrant Women Laborers in Kerala* study and my field visit identifies five distinct ways in which women migrate to Kerala:

1. **Arriving after marriage:** Many women migrate to Kerala after marrying individuals residing there.
2. **Arriving with the help of relatives and friends:** Migrant networks play a significant role, as women often rely on connections to find opportunities in Kerala.
3. **Arriving through the consent of the contractor or primary employer:** Some women migrate with the assistance of contractors or employers who provide them with job opportunities in Kerala.
4. **Arriving through community organizations:** Community organizations and associations often play a pivotal role in aiding women's migration to Kerala by providing support and guidance.
5. **Arriving alone:** A substantial number of women migrate independently, seeking employment and livelihood opportunities in Kerala.

Women who migrate to Kerala are employed in a wide range of labour sectors, including:

1. **Plywood Manufacturing Units:** Many women find work in plywood manufacturing units, contributing to Kerala's thriving wood industry.
2. **Brick Industry:** Some women are employed in brick manufacturing, playing a role in construction.
3. **Fishing:** Coastal areas offer employment opportunities in the fishing industry for migrant women.
4. **Tailoring:** Women with tailoring skills often find work in garment production units.
5. **Bakery:** Several women are employed in bakeries, contributing to the food processing sector.
6. **Pan Shop:** Some migrant women run their pan shops, offering various products to local communities.
7. **Construction Work:** Construction sites are a significant source of employment for migrant women.
8. **Beauty Parlor:** The beauty industry also provides job opportunities for women who migrate to Kerala.
9. **Domestic Work:** Many women work as domestic help, catering to the needs of households.

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10. **Sex Work:** Unfortunately, a subset of female migrants are engaged in sex work, reflecting the vulnerabilities some face in their pursuit of livelihoods.

Despite their vital contributions to the Kerala economy, female migrant workers often encounter many challenges. One of the most significant issues is the lack of access to legal aid under the Interest Migrant Work Maintenance Act of 1979. Additionally, the legal system frequently needs to address their grievances effectively. In contrast to the rules stipulating that workers in manufacturing units should be registered with the Labor Department and receive benefits such as ESI and PF, female workers in these units are often excluded from registration, depriving them of their fundamental rights.

Moreover, female migrant workers face numerous hardships in their daily lives. These include the non-availability of bathroom facilities at workplaces, unsanitary living conditions, and mental and physical harassment from employers and co-workers. These challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive protective rights of migrant labourers.

Based on extensive fieldwork, the study reveals that Kerala hosts the most significant number of female migrant workers from West Bengal, followed by Assam. Women from West Bengal are predominantly engaged in the construction sector, and some even manage their own pan and snack shops. Conversely, female migrants from Assam find employment primarily in the plywood factory sector. Understanding these regional migration patterns provides valuable insights into the diverse experiences and roles of female migrant workers in Kerala.

Efforts to address these challenges should be multifaceted, encompassing legal reforms, workplace improvements, and support systems for female migrants. By recognizing the contributions and struggles of these women, Kerala can take steps towards creating a more equitable and just environment for all its residents, regardless of their place of origin. Ultimately, a comprehensive and compassionate approach is needed to ensure the well-being and rights of female migrant workers in Kerala.

### Ethnographic Case Studies in the Perumbavoor Region

#### Study Location: Perumbavoor

Ernakulam district of Kerala has a population of 32,82,388 as per 2011 census. Ernakulam district consists of 95 grama panchayats, six municipalities, and 14 block panchayats. According to government records, Ernakulam district has the highest number of migrant workers in Kerala. Out of 5161588 migrant workers in Kerala (Table I), 115053 workers live in Ernakulam district. According to the government, the total number of female migrant workers in Kerala is 26,2519. Out of these, 9989 women live in Ernakulam district. However, the Kerala State Planning Board's report and the Kerala Institution of Labor and Employment report contradict the Kerala government's official estimation. According to these reports, around 34 lakh migrant workers live in Kerala, of which 7 lakh migrant workers live in Ernakulam district. Perumbavoor is where most migrant workers live in Ernakulam district. In Perumbavoor, known as the “hub of migrant workers”, migrant workers rent rooms in large buildings in Gandhi Bazar, Bengal Colony, Kantantara, Allapra, Vallam, and Vengola and live as families and alone. As part of this study, 5 case studies prepared based on direct interviews with migrant female workers living alone and female workers living as families are presented here.

**Table – I: Migrant Workers in Kerala**

S/NO	DISTRICT	MALE	FEMALE	TRANSGENDER	TOTAL
1	Alappuzha	33,720	3,203	4	36,927
2	Ernakulam	1,05,038	9,989	29	1,15,053
3	Idukki	16,600	2,985	2	19,587
4	Kannur	27,733	1,139	2	28,874
5	Kasargod	15,305	552	1	15,858
6	Kollam	24,459	480	7	24,946
7	Kottayam	33,842	405	4	34,251
8	Kozhikode	44,083	535	10	44,628
9	Malappuram	28,965	883	8	29,694
10	Palakkad	23,712	1,225	6	24,694
11	Pathanamthitta	23,712	407	0	24,119
12	Thiruvananthapuram	61,698	2,082	8	63,788
13	Thrissur	40,688	1,206	6	41,900
14	Wayanad	10,410	1,428	1	11,839
		4,89,965	26,519	88	5,16,158

\*Kerala Government Official Report Received by RTI.

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## CASE STUDY

### 1. Challenges Faced by in Kerala's Plywood Industry

Near Perumbavoor lies Palakattazham, home to a small village known as Bengal Colony, which earned its name due to an influx of migrant workers from West Bengal. This case study focuses on Jayanthi, 42 years old, a resident of Bengal Colony who migrated to Kerala from Assam with her husband in 2015. Jayanthi's journey and experiences shed light on the challenges faced by female migrant workers in Kerala's plywood industry.

Upon their arrival in Kerala, Jayanthi's husband secured employment at a plywood company in the Vallam area. In pursuit of economic stability, Jayanthi joined another plywood company as a veneer cutter. Her role involved cutting veneer to various dimensions required for plywood production. She anticipated that life would improve after joining the plywood industry, but low wages and the demanding nature of the work marked her initial experiences.

In 2015, Jayanthi began her employment, earning a meagre eight (8/-) rupees per hour. Veneer cutting demanded a good speed, and although Jayanthi had some familiarity with the work, her pace was initially slow. It was not until 2017 that she saw a slight increase in her hourly wage, which rose to Rs 12/- per hour. During this period, Jayanthi changed jobs and worked at three different plywood companies.

One glaring issue Jayanthi observed in the plywood industry was the inadequate bathroom facilities for female workers. She recalls that she and five other women worked together in one plywood company, and the lack of basic amenities made their workdays challenging. The work environment became even more demanding, with no access to clean drinking water. The workday typically spanned from 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., and the women were allowed a one-hour break in the afternoon. During this break, they faced the dilemma of lacking proper restroom facilities. They often resorted to relieving themselves at the company's waste collection point. This area, however, was often frequented by male colleagues, making it an uncomfortable and unsanitary experience. While male workers in the plywood company had access to accommodation with toilet facilities, Jayanthi noted that the conditions were far from hygienic. The uncleanliness of the toilets contributed to health issues, such as itching and urinary tract infections, which several female workers, including Jayanthi, experienced. Ultimately, she sought treatment at a government hospital and recovered from these health problems.

One of the most glaring issues faced by female migrant workers like Jayanthi is the absence of benefits or legal protection under the Interest Migrant Work Maintenance Act of 1979. Although the Government of Kerala has issued an order stipulating that principal employers or contractors must register migrant workers under the Labor Department, most plywood company owners have been reluctant to comply. Jayanthi recounted her experience working at a plywood company with a total workforce of 17 individuals. Shockingly, only six workers, including herself, were registered with the company. This discrepancy left 11 male workers and one female worker unregistered. The situation was exacerbated by transferring unregistered workers to other locations just before Labor Department officials arrived for inspections. Furthermore, Jayanthi revealed her need for more awareness about social security schemes and insurance programs implemented by the Kerala government. She had not registered for these schemes, indicating a broader gap in disseminating information and facilitating access to these vital benefits for migrant workers.

While Jayanthi noted that there had been no significant incidents of hate speech or discrimination from the local population, she mentioned individuals making sexually suggestive remarks during her commute to the plywood company. Despite these unsettling encounters, she chose not to engage further or report such incidents.

Jayanthi's story sheds light on the challenges faced by female migrant workers in Kerala's plywood industry. The lack of adequate facilities for women, the absence of legal protections, and limited awareness of social security schemes are significant issues that must be addressed urgently. Ensuring equitable treatment, safe working conditions, and access to benefits for female migrant workers is a matter of social justice and an essential step towards harnessing their contributions to Kerala's economy. Efforts must be made to enforce existing labour regulations and promote awareness among workers and employers. Adequate facilities, including clean restrooms and drinking water, should be made available to all workers, regardless of gender. Initiatives to educate and inform migrant workers about their rights under government schemes are essential to bridge the information gap. Ultimately, Jayanthi's case illustrates the importance of recognizing and rectifying the challenges faced by female migrant workers, ensuring their well-being, and fostering an inclusive and supportive environment in the plywood industry and beyond.

### 2. Pavizham's Journey: A Tale of Resilience and Labor in Kerala

In 2001, Pavizham (39 years) embarked on a life-altering journey with her husband from Tamil Nadu to Kerala. Little did she know that struggles, resilience, and a constant quest for employment would mark this journey. Their arrival in Kerala was filled with hope for a better life, but it soon became evident that challenges lay ahead. Upon their arrival, Pavizham was unemployed for two long years. The frustration of joblessness weighed heavily on their aspirations for a prosperous life. In 2003, he finally secured work as a domestic labour household.

Their daily routine was gruelling. Pavizham would leave for work early in the morning while her husband ventured to Perumbavoor town for employment. Her workday typically began at 8:30 a.m. and involved many tasks, including sweeping the yard, washing dishes, tending to the dog pen, laundry, and mopping the floors. Despite the arduous nature of their work, Pavizham's husband

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earned a meagre 450 rupees a day in 2003, and she earned 3300 per month. For several years, Pavizham continued working diligently in the same household until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 disrupted their lives. The job that sustained them was no longer available, leaving them in a precarious situation. It was only in 2021 that their fortunes changed when Pavizham started working in Mekkad (Helper). This new opportunity brought her a daily wage of 850 rupees and meals. The couple would set out for Perumbavoor town at dawn, hoping to be picked up by contractors or homeowners needing labour. Their livelihood depended on these daily opportunities. She acquired many skills, from mixing cement to using shovels and pans and even pouring water. Her determination to secure employment led her to work under a Malayali contractor since 2023. This change allowed her to be transported to work sites and then dropped off in Perumbavoor.

After years of labour in Kerala, Pavizham remained unaware of the registration system and its benefits. Her focus had always been on securing employment to sustain her family. She and her husband never intended to settle permanently in Kerala, planning to return to Tamil Nadu in a decade to lead a peaceful life.

Despite their challenges, Pavizham ensured that her children had access to education. Both her children attended government schools, emphasizing the importance of education for a brighter future. In the early days, obtaining caste and income certificates posed significant hurdles, but these essential documents were eventually obtained with the ward members' assistance. One stark reality that Pavizham highlighted is the lack of equal pay for equal work. While contractors received 850 rupees for her labour, after deducting a commission of 200 rupees, she was left with only 650 rupees. This disparity also extended to men, who received 750 rupees for similar work. Pavizham acknowledged the difficulty women faced in finding employment and the consequent need to accept whatever job came their way. Despite the demand for equal pay, the overarching concern was consistent engagement. Pavizham's story is a testament to the resilience and determination of migrant labourers in Kerala, particularly women who face unique challenges in the workforce. Her journey from Tamil Nadu to Kerala, marked by hardships and adaptation, serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of labour and the pursuit of a better life for one's family. In the face of adversity, Pavizham and her husband strive for a brighter future, one day at a time.

### **3. A woman in sex work**

I met Mohini (31) for the first time during my research in 2017. As part of my PhD research, I worked as a manager in a plywood company for six months. At that time, when I discussed with the supervisor of the plywood company about how migrant workers' income is spent in Kerala, he told me that the critical fact is that most of the plywood company workers spend their weekly salary on sexual pleasure. However, such an expected behaviour is not present among migrant workers in Kerala. I am quoting what Mohini said with the help of the supervisor's translation while sitting in a small coffee shop at Perumbavoor Private Bus Stand. Mohini came to Kerala in 2013. Mohini came to Kerala with her relatives from Orissa to work in a plywood company, pretending to be his wife. Mohini's family is under much financial burden, and finding that there is a job opportunity in Kerala, Mohini comes to Kerala with her relatives. A relative, who worked in a plywood company, took a room in a line building and lived there with Mohini.

Mohini gave that time to all his sexual needs. At that time, the situation was too much for a girl who came to the state alone in search of employment, and that girl who was labelled a wife could not resist. After that, his relative brought others to that line building and had sex with them there. A relative took a thousand rupees from someone. Mohini would get Rs 500 out of it. Till 2017, Mohini lived in many places like this. Even today, Mohini lives among sex workers who live in areas where only migrant workers live and pretend to be family. Again, I tried to meet and talk to Mohini as part of the SERB project. Fourteen families, including Mohini, live in the nearby areas of Perumbavoor in the line building run by the Malayalis. However, Mohini did not say where this area is or how to get there. Let it be said here that it has not been possible to check and confirm this information obtained based on an interview, which is part of the fieldwork. Although I know there is such an area near Perumbavoor, I cannot reach there, and there is no authentic evidence to expose this sex centre under police protection.

### **4. A Constructor Worker Experience**

Jamila (41), who came from West Bengal in 2012, and her friends live in a small village called Perumani in the Arakkapady area. Six women live with Jamila. Jamila's friend Nehru was the first to come with her husband from West Bengal. Jamila and others reached there as Jamila's friend told her that her friend's husband was a contract labourer. He does the work of sending people to sites. Jamila's friend's husband came here as a labourer in 2007 and has become a labour recruiter. Jamila goes to work in construction. Jamila carried stones to build houses for the Malayalees and carried cement and sand in big containers with the men. Jamila is in good physical health. Jamila said that in the early days, she used to get 450 rupees and food while going to work. Now she gets 950 rupees and food. Jamila's associates run bajikada and paan shops in Perumbavoor. They work only on Sundays for the rest of the day in the Malayalee's garden for caste flying. Jamila came to Kerala and had to face great difficulties professionally. Jamila said that the Malayali workers were maltreated. Jamila said This is the incident: "When the house is being built, the mixture of cement and sand should be reddened in a pan and placed on top of the building. Malayalam puts the pot on Jamila's head and touches Jamila's breasts with his hand. He will carry on the work with a look of ignorance."



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The trouble Jamila faced when she touched a woman's body without permission was immense. It is a violation of her rights, and beyond that, it is a form of sexual assault. Jamila did not respond because she felt that if she answered, she would lose her job and become an extensive criminal along with the remaining Malayalis. Also, Jamila says that there have been sexual assaults by foreign workers inside the pick-up-like vehicle that transports all the migrant workers from Perumbavoor to the site. Jamila does not know if a system is in place to ensure safety for women at work. Nevertheless, after going to the police station, referring to her friend's experience, Jamila said there was no positive attitude from the police towards migrant workers.

### **5. Empowerment and Challenges of Migrant Women Entrepreneurs in Kerala: The Journey of Lalitha**

Lalitha (48), who came from Karnataka 15 years ago, had a life full of misery. Lalitha came to Kerala with her husband and three children. Her husband Perumbavoor, a footloose labourer, used to go to look for work in the morning. At that time, Lalitha looked at the children in the line building in Kandantara, where she lived. Lalitha's job search started when the youngest child started going to Anganwadi. Lalitha's three children are studying in Kerala. The elder now goes to work in a private company. The remaining two girls are still learning. At first, Lalitha worked with Muslim families in the area. Lalitha used to go to work in three houses every day and bring the food and money she got from there to their residence. After that, Lalitha worked as a gardener and cleaner in many houses. Only when the salary was not commensurate with the job did he think of starting his own business. The business started by bringing second-quality clothes from Bangalore to Kerala at very cheap prices, and on Sundays, the dresses were lined up in front of a closed shop at Perumbavoor Pathipalam Junction. Perumbavoor city has an influx of migrant workers on Sundays. Seeing the success of Lalitha's business, Lalitha expanded her business to two other women still selling this garment in Perumbavoor town.

The problem faced in this profession is that there is a custom in Kerala of paying ground rent to the shop when the clothes are placed in front of the closed shop. Lalitha is ready to give it. However, political leaders, police officers, and local gangsters will also collect a special levy from them. One hundred are taken from the hands of male migrant workers, while 150 and 200 are taken from the hands of female migrant workers. Lalitha asked to create conditions for employing foreign workers, promote this system, and provide assistance. Lalitha said in a simple speech that self-employment loans should be given to the migrant workers in Kerala as per the plans of Kerala. Currently, they are adopting a policy of eroding all the rights of the migrant workers. Even after 15 years, Lalitha has not received government benefits like Awas Insurance Card. One peace that comes with thinking about Lalitha Kerala is that children's schooling is going well. Lalitha demanded that Kerala has a social environment that frees people regardless of caste and religion and that this environment should also be extended to workplaces.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

- 1. Enhance Enforcement of Labor Laws:** The Kerala government should prioritize the rigorous enforcement of labour laws and regulations within plywood and other manufacturing industries. This includes ensuring that all employers register their migrant workers with the Labor Department as mandated by existing laws. Stringent penalties for non-compliance should be established. Regular and surprise inspections should be conducted to identify unregistered workers and address labour exploitation effectively.
- 2. Improvement of Workplace Conditions:** To address the dire lack of basic facilities, the government must mandate that employers provide clean and accessible restrooms for both male and female workers. Hygiene and sanitation standards should be strictly monitored, focusing on maintaining clean and sanitary facilities. Adequate drinking water sources must be provided within workplace premises. Additionally, educational programs on personal hygiene and health should be implemented for all migrant workers.
- 3. Empower and Protect Female Migrant Workers:** The government should launch awareness campaigns tailored specifically for female migrant workers, informing them about their rights, available support services, and social security schemes. Legal aid centres should be established in areas with high migrant worker populations, prioritizing cases involving female workers. Safe and anonymous reporting mechanisms for harassment or exploitation incidents should be promoted, and easy access to healthcare facilities for female migrant workers should be ensured. Community organizations should also be encouraged to support and guide female migrants, helping them integrate into their new communities and access essential services.
- 4. The government should promote fair labour practices and address the gender wage gap.**

It is imperative to implement and enforce equal pay for equal work policies. This would ensure that female labourers receive equitable compensation for their labour, eliminating the prevailing wage disparities. Additionally, initiatives to raise awareness about workers' rights and access to vocational training programs should be established to empower women in the workforce. Such policies would not only enhance gender equality but also contribute to improved living standards and economic stability for marginalized labourers, ultimately fostering a more just and equitable society
- 5. Enhanced Workplace Safety Measures:**
  - 5.1 Implement stringent safety measures at construction sites, including mandatory training programs for all workers on safe working conditions and preventing sexual harassment.**

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5.2 Ensure that workers, regardless of origin, have adequate personal protective equipment and that their workloads are reasonable.

5.3 Enforce strict penalties for employers who fail to adhere to these safety standards.

### 6. Empowering Reporting and Support:

6.1 Establish a confidential and accessible reporting system for incidents of harassment or assault, protecting workers from retaliation.

6.2 Encourage workers to report any violations and provide them with legal and counselling support.

6.3 Create a supportive environment where workers feel safe reporting incidents and investigate reported cases promptly and thoroughly.

### 7. Dedicated Transportation for Migrant Workers:

7.1 Introduce a trustworthy and secure transportation system for migrant workers travelling to and from construction sites.

7.2 Employ stringent safety standards for transportation providers, with penalties for non-compliance.

8. **Worker Welfare Committees:** Establish worker welfare committees at construction sites comprising migrant and local workers. These committees should address worker grievances, monitor workplace conditions, and facilitate communication with relevant authorities. Encourage open dialogue between workers and employers to foster a safer and more inclusive work environment.

9. **Financial Assistance for Migrant Women Entrepreneurs:** The government of Kerala should initiate a particular loan program tailored to the needs of migrant women entrepreneurs. With simplified application procedures, these loans should be offered at preferential interest rates. Aspiring entrepreneurs like Lalitha can start and expand their businesses more efficiently by providing access to capital.

10. **Streamlined Regulatory Framework:** To address the illegal levies and harassment faced by migrant women entrepreneurs, the government should establish a transparent regulatory framework. Additionally, a dedicated helpline or support system should be established to address the grievances and concerns of migrant entrepreneurs promptly.

### 11. Inclusive Social Welfare Programs for Migrant Workers

The need for inclusive social welfare programs for long-term migrant workers. To make a supportive environment, the following policy recommendations are crucial:

11.1. **Access to Government Benefits:** The government of Kerala should take proactive steps to ensure that long-term migrant workers have access to government welfare programs. Establishing outreach programs and centres in areas with high migrant populations can facilitate this process.

11.2. **Promotion of Inclusive Workplaces:** Kerala should prioritize creating an inclusive social environment in workplaces, free from discrimination based on caste, religion, or migrant status. Promoting diversity and inclusion can improve the work culture and foster a sense of belonging among migrant workers.

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