



Post-COVID Employment Challenges Among Migrant Workers: A Socio-Economic and Policy-Based Analysis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers worldwide. This paper examines the post-pandemic employment challenges faced by migrant workers through socio-economic and policy-based lenses. Drawing on global and Indian case studies, it analyzes the structural vulnerabilities exposed by the crisis, the effectiveness of policy responses, and the persistent barriers to recovery. The analysis highlights the need for integrated, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to ensure the sustainable reintegration and protection of migrant workers in the post-COVID era.

Keywords: Employment, Migrant Workers, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

Migrant workers form the backbone of many economies, providing essential labor in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and services. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed and exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Lockdowns, border closures, and economic contractions led to mass job losses, wage theft, and forced returns, leaving millions stranded without income or social protection. As countries move towards recovery, understanding the employment challenges faced by migrant workers is crucial for designing effective policy interventions and fostering inclusive growth.

2. Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers

2.1. Employment Loss and Income Insecurity

- **Mass Unemployment:** Migrant workers were among the first to lose jobs as businesses shut down or downsized. In India, for example, wage labor—one of the most common forms of migrant employment—was severely impacted, with many workers reporting only 2-3 months of paid work in the year following the pandemic.
- **Reduced Wages and Bargaining Power:** The oversupply of labor and reduced demand led to lower wages and diminished bargaining power for those who managed to retain employment.
- **Debt and Depletion of Savings:** With little or no income, many migrant workers incurred debt or exhausted their savings to meet basic needs, leading to long-term financial instability.

2.2. Informality and Lack of Social Protection

- **Precarious Work:** Most migrant workers are employed in the informal sector, lacking formal contracts, job security, or access to labor rights.
- **Exclusion from Social Safety Nets:** Migrant workers were often excluded from government relief measures, such as food

- distribution and cash transfers, due to lack of documentation or registration in destination areas.
- **Limited Access to Healthcare:** The absence of health insurance and poor living conditions increased their vulnerability to infection and limited their access to medical care.

2.3. Gendered and Intersectional Vulnerabilities

- **Women Migrant Workers:** Women faced disproportionate challenges, including job loss, wage discrimination, and increased unpaid care responsibilities.
- **Marginalized Groups:** Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized communities experienced compounded disadvantages due to social exclusion and limited access to welfare schemes.

3. Structural and Administrative Barriers

3.1. Data Gaps and Policy Blind Spots

- **Lack of Reliable Data:** The absence of up-to-date and disaggregated data on migrant workers hindered effective policy targeting and delivery of relief measures.
- **Invisibility in Urban Planning:** Migrant workers' needs were often overlooked in city planning, resulting in inadequate housing, sanitation, and transport facilities.

3.2. Barriers to Social Protection

- **Documentation and Registration:** Many migrants lacked the necessary documents (e.g., ration cards, Aadhaar) to access welfare schemes, despite government initiatives like the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC).
- **Fragmented Governance:** Overlapping responsibilities among government agencies led to gaps in service delivery and accountability.

3.3. Discrimination and Stigma

- **Social Exclusion:** Migrant workers faced discrimination and xenophobia, both in destination cities and upon return to their home communities.
- **Stigmatization of Returnees:** Returnees were often viewed as carriers of disease and subjected to quarantine, social isolation, and even violence.

4. Policy Responses and Their Effectiveness

4.1. Emergency Relief Measures

- **Food Security:** The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and Atmanirbhar Bharat schemes provided food grains and pulses to migrants, but many were unable to benefit due to lack of documentation or incomplete implementation of ONORC.
- **Cash Transfers:** Direct benefit transfers were announced, but the amounts were often insufficient and many migrants were excluded due to lack of bank accounts or registration.
- **Shelter and Transport:** Temporary shelters and special trains (Shramik trains) were arranged, but logistical challenges and high costs limited their accessibility.

4.2. Employment and Livelihood Support

- **MGNREGA Expansion:** The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was expanded to absorb returning

migrants, but the scheme struggled to meet the surge in demand and provided fewer days of work than guaranteed.

- **Skill Development Initiatives:** Programs were launched to upskill migrants, but the majority remained in low-skilled, low-paying jobs due to limited opportunities and inadequate training.

4.3. Social Protection and Welfare

- **E-Shram Portal:** The creation of a national database for unorganized workers aimed to improve access to social security, but registration and implementation remain ongoing challenges.
- **Judicial Interventions:** The Supreme Court of India directed states to ensure food security for migrants and complete the registration of unorganized workers, emphasizing the need for enforceable rights.

4.4. Gaps and Limitations

- **Limited Coverage:** Relief measures often failed to reach the most vulnerable due to administrative bottlenecks, lack of awareness, and exclusionary criteria.
- **Short-Term Focus:** Most interventions were emergency responses, with limited attention to long-term reintegration and sustainable employment.

5. Post-COVID Employment Landscape: Persistent and Emerging Challenges

5.1. Slow and Uneven Recovery

- **Sectoral Disparities:** Sectors dominated by migrant labor, such as construction, textiles, and hospitality, have been slow to recover, leading to persistent underemployment and job insecurity.
- **Geographic Mobility:** Internal migration increased as workers sought jobs in new locations, but recovery was uneven, with better outcomes for those able to move to areas with stronger labor demand.

5.2. Wage Suppression and Precarity

- **Lower Wages:** The oversupply of labor and weak bargaining power have led to wage suppression, with many migrants earning below minimum wage levels.
- **Informalization:** The informal sector remains the primary source of employment, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and exclusion from labor rights.

5.3. Social and Psychological Impacts

- **Debt and Financial Stress:** Many migrants remain trapped in debt, with limited prospects for repayment due to unstable employment.
- **Mental Health:** The trauma of job loss, displacement, and social exclusion has led to increased psychological distress among migrant workers and their families.

5.4. Policy and Governance Challenges

- **Fragmented Social Protection:** Despite new initiatives, social protection for migrants remains fragmented and difficult to access, especially for those in irregular or undocumented situations.
- **Lack of Long-Term Planning:** There is a need for comprehensive, rights-based policies that address both immediate needs and long-term integration of migrant workers into the labor market and social safety nets.

6. Recommendations for Inclusive Recovery

6.1. Strengthen Social Protection

- **Universal Coverage:** Ensure portability and universal access to social security schemes, including health, food, and income support, regardless of migration status.
- **Data and Registration:** Complete and regularly update national databases of migrant and informal workers to enable targeted interventions.

6.2. Promote Decent Work and Livelihoods

- **Expand Employment Guarantees:** Increase the number of days and coverage of employment guarantee schemes, and develop urban employment programs modeled on MGNREGA.
- **Skill Development:** Invest in demand-driven skill training and certification to enhance employability and support upward mobility for migrant workers.

6.3. Foster Social Inclusion and Equity

- **Anti-Discrimination Measures:** Implement policies to combat discrimination and xenophobia against migrant workers, both in workplaces and communities.
- **Gender-Sensitive Approaches:** Address the specific needs of women migrant workers, including equal pay, safe working conditions, and support for unpaid care work.

6.4. Improve Governance and Coordination

- **Integrated Policy Frameworks:** Foster coordination among central, state, and local governments to ensure seamless delivery of services and protection of migrant rights.
- **Participatory Planning:** Involve migrant workers and their representatives in policy design, implementation, and monitoring to ensure responsiveness to their needs.

6.5. Prepare for Future Crises

- **Crisis Response Mechanisms:** Develop contingency plans and rapid response systems to protect migrant workers during future shocks, including pandemics and economic downturns.
- **International Cooperation:** Strengthen bilateral and multilateral agreements to protect the rights of international migrant workers and ensure access to social protection across borders.

7. Conclusion

The post-COVID employment challenges faced by migrant workers are deeply rooted in structural inequalities, informality, and policy gaps. While emergency relief measures provided some respite, sustainable recovery requires a paradigm shift towards inclusive, rights-based, and integrated approaches. Strengthening social protection, promoting decent work, and ensuring the social and economic inclusion of migrant workers are essential for building resilient societies and economies in the post-pandemic world.

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