

INDIA

Women's Regional Network

The Reality of Racism for Women Migrant Workers from North-east India in Delhi



Issues Facing Internal Women Migrants in India

India, a fast-developing country, boasts diversity and a complex social fabric. However, deep structural inequalities persist, with development concentrated in metropolitan cities and industrial areas. These disparities lead to widespread internal inter-state migration. It is estimated that 40 per cent of Delhi's population consists of interstate migrants who migrated for better work and education opportunities, with a considerable percentage moving from the north-east states of India.¹ This region is marked by internal strife, conflict, militarism and lower levels of development, which has been accentuated by the recent ethnic conflicts in the region.²

Women's migration trends from the north-eastern region of India are distinct from those of the rest of the country.³ There is limited scholarship and accounting of Women Migrant Workers (WMWs) in the national labour laws and policies⁴ and even more sparse information on WMWs from the north-east. Women migrating from the north-east face multiple marginalisations owing to their distinct social identities. As WMWs, they face issues of exploitation at work, wage theft and lack of security in informal work, and as women migrants from the north-east they face structural discrimination, violence, objectification and racism. Due to their distinct facial

¹ The eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura form 'the north-east states of India'. In this report, we have interchangeably used 'the north-east' and 'the north-east states of India'. Hindustan Times. Kawoosa, V.M. (2019, July 28). Delhi has the highest share of inter-state migrants. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/delhi-has-highest-share-of-inter-state-migrants/story-QCYXSWInSYAJbNb25ljcPL.html>

² Ellis-Petersen, H. (2023, July 21). 'Manipur: why is there conflict and how is the government responding?'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/21/manipur-india-why-is-there-conflict-and-how-is-the-government-responding>; Das, Y.S. (2023, May 04). 'Manipur violence: State is burning, but what is the decades-old fuel behind the fire?'. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-violence-clashes-nrc-meitei-kuki-naga-imphal-valley-illegal-immigration-myanmar-reserve-forests-biren-singh-2368476-2023-05-04>

³ Mukherjee, M. and Dutta, C.. (2018). Migration of North-East Women in Delhi: A Macro Level Analysis. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* vol 3(1-2), 95-112. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2394481120170107?journalCode=sisa>

⁴ Francis, A. & Dubey, D. (2019, March 6). Women, Work, and Migration. *India Development Review*. <https://idronline.org/women-work-and-migration/>

features, dressing style, language, and food habits, women from this region are perceived as 'foreigners' and subjected to rampant harassment and racism in their daily lives.⁵ There has been a manifold increase in violence and

discrimination faced by them during the COVID-19 pandemic⁶ and with the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur, between Kukis and Meiteis since May 2023.⁷

The FPAR Journey

The Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) conducted by Women's Regional Network-India (WRN) aimed to mobilise internal WMWs from the north-east to assert their right to live and work in Delhi, free from harassment and oppression. The research also aimed to mobilise and build the capacities of ten WMWs who had migrated from the north-east and live and work in two suburbs of Delhi - Munirka and Kishangarh as at the time of this research. The research was conducted between October 2022 and December 2023, and the data was collected through feminist participatory action research, which included Focus Group Discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews, surveys, desk research and participant observation.



FPAR Findings and Analysis

North-east women migrate to capital city for better employment opportunities

'Let me just say there is no job opportunity other than being a teacher in Manipur.... There might be some jobs, but not many. This is the main reason why many northeast people are coming to Delhi, to find any job! Here, if we can speak a little bit of English, we are able to get work. There are a lot of job opportunities here in Delhi.'

***- Marina, a Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur.
Excerpt shared from an interview with her on 28th August 2023.***

Lack of work opportunities, difficult living conditions, frequent strikes, and curfews are critical factors that influence migration out of the region. Of those surveyed, 74.7 per cent shared that they had migrated to Delhi for better employment opportunities, while 21.3 per cent migrated for a better quality of life, which included more and better-paying work opportunities.

It is mostly young women from the north-east who have basic education who migrate to the cities in search of employment. They tend to migrate alone or with friends or sisters (not with their spouses or family). These women are

mainly employed in call centres, Business Processing Outsourcing (BPOs), hotels, showrooms, salons, restaurants and shops.

Many older women and those who migrated earlier have the social and financial capital to start small businesses. These women opened small shops to cater to their community's needs by selling specific food items, groceries, or clothing unique to their hometowns. Many young and recently migrated women seek employment in these establishments until they find their footing in the city.

⁵ Colney, K. (2020, April 3). 'Indians from the northeast face intensified racism as coronavirus fears grow'. *The Caravan*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-outbreak-in-india-northeast-racial-targetting-delhi-1657276-2020-03-19> ; Yadav, A. (2020, March 19). 'Being called corona: People from Northeast allege racial targetting in Delhi'. *India Today*. <https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/coronavirus-increases-racism-against-indians-from-northeast>

⁶ Yadav, A. (2020, March 19). 'Being called corona: People from Northeast allege racial targetting in Delhi'. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-outbreak-in-india-northeast-racial-targetting-delhi-1657276-2020-03-19>

⁷ Colney, K. (2020, April 3). 'Indians from the northeast face intensified racism as coronavirus fears grow'. *The Caravan*. <https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/coronavirus-increases-racism-against-indians-from-northeast>

Overcharging, harassment, and precarious housing is common

'Some of the house owners don't want to give us their room on rent because we are from the north-east. Some who are willing to give us rent increase the rent. For example, the North Indian people give their room rent for 5,000, but to us, they will charge 6,000/7,000 (or 72- 84 USD) per month because we are from the north-east.'

- Esther a Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur living in North Delhi. Excerpts shared from their response in the survey.

'We took this room on rent and paid money. They are charging too much for this small room. It has only been two weeks since the landlord sent this notice asking us to pay rent or leave the room. We did not even get any agreement and don't know how much they will charge because we don't know the language. We came here due to the Manipur war and have not found any work yet. It is very difficult for us.'

- A Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur living in Munirka, Delhi.

The community faces an acute housing problem, with safe and affordable housing options being limited in the city. When houses are made available, rents are unfairly high compared to others. Safe housing can be accessed only through family and community networks. Landlords frequently harass women from this region by imposing uneven pricing and excessive charges for utilities. They

take advantage of the difficulty these women face in finding housing. They also do not have rental agreements, which prevents them from being able to directly access utilities and other benefits. Women reported that erratic rent hikes with ad hoc eviction decisions were also regular practices.

Women faced daily experiences of racism and harassment

'When I open my shop early in the morning, at 3 am or 4 am, men on bikes come here and shout - how much for one hour, how much will you charge? Thinking I am a prostitute. It has made me feel very scared and unsafe.'

- Asina, a Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur living in Kishangarh

Women across the FPAR said they experienced frequent and everyday harassment and discrimination in their life. The most common manifestation of this was in the form of street harassment and the rampant use of racist slurs. Women from the north-east are often employed in the

hospitality, beauty and service sectors; this has meant they are often stereotyped as being immoral and promiscuous. A woman migrant, Linda from Manipur, described one of several traumatic incidents -

'Me with my three friends were visiting the snow world and there were a bunch of guys like four or five and they started calling me "nepali""kanchi""chini""mom" (commonly used racist slurs) etc. which made me so angry and nobody say anything to those guys.'

Women migrants also tend to feel reluctant to speak out against it due to a fear of drawing attention to themselves, which would prevent their assimilation. Their experiences of prejudice are not limited to individuals, but also extend to service providers and members of state institutions.

The recent spate of violence in Manipur at the time of this report, has aggravated the situation, and they are now targeted further and perceived as militants, separatists or anti-nationals.

Women were more vulnerable due to the Covid-19 pandemic and ethnic violence

'During COVID, it was the hardest period till now; there was no job, no option, and we were stuck in Delhi every time we went out for groceries. Local people stared at us like we were the virus.'

- Linda, a Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur living in Kishangarh

Another WMW and FPAR participant, Merci from Manipur expressed,

'This time, I faced such a lot of harassment. They call us terrorists. I heard this. I was walking with my friends on the road, and someone said, "see, these are terrorists who have come from Manipur." I felt very bad hearing this.'

- Merci, a Woman Migrant Worker and FPAR participant from Manipur



During the pandemic, being perceived as 'Chinese' and, thus, the carrier of the virus was one of the main reasons for targeting those from the north-east. Most reported being forcefully evicted from their homes, while some faced complaints from neighbours. They were the worst hit as the sectors they are employed in were the first to shut down during the pandemic and the slowest to revive.

The conflict in Manipur has caused the forceful displacement of several vulnerable groups to Delhi, among them mainly women and girls belonging to tribal communities. This sudden influx of migrants has put a

greater demand on previously limited resources and has led to price hikes coupled with an increase in scams and new ways of exploitation. The conflict has impacted and strained the city's inter-tribal community ties and has threatened the sense of security for tribal women from the region. Among those who have recently migrated, many faced violence and are now suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and stress. The circulation of fake news, rumours and constant threats of violence, coupled with the government's inaction, has increased feelings of hopelessness and anger among the women.

Limited recognition, support and avenues for redressal under current legislation

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWCC) 2020 and the Delhi Shops and Establishments Rules, 1954 are the primary labour laws covering WMWs from the north-east working in the hospitality, beauty and service sectors. These laws are largely inadequate in protecting their rights and interests, with limited to no mechanism for workers to file complaints or raise their grievances when their rights have been violated. People employed in these sectors are routinely overworked and underpaid. There is also limited ability to collectivise under these laws. Consultations during the

FPAR revealed the presence of local differences in interpretations of the laws, which often meant WMWs were prevented from accessing vital government services such as food rations and pensions. The OSHWCC does not include people employed in the beauty, hospitality and service sectors within its ambit. The presence of women from the north-east is highest in these sectors. These women, despite being workers and belonging to tribal communities, are unable to access legal redressal from both their labour and their tribal identity.⁸ The state has failed to recognise and safeguard their rights.

⁸ The Indian Constitution upholds the right to equality and forbids discrimination based on race, gender, caste and other identities. There is a law called 'Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act' which criminalises discrimination, harassment and abuse meted out to a person on the basis of their caste identity or tribal identity. A significant percentage of the migrant population from the north-east in Delhi are people from tribal communities.

Women-led Actions through the FPAR

Through the course of the FPAR, a consistent attempt was made to forge unity across ethnic borders and build solidarity amongst women migrants. Recognising the capacity of women migrants from the north-east, the FPAR attempted to build awareness and knowledge through training, workshops and capacity-strengthening sessions. The research focused on improving self-confidence and awareness among the community women. This meant that during moments of crisis, women have been able to support each other to seek justice and to stand up for their rights. A resource supporting this endeavour was a particular WhatsApp group, which, apart from being a tool

to stay connected, also served as a space to reach out for help at any time. The research focused on improving connectivity and networks with critical stakeholders, especially the strengthening of the relationship with two local organisations working with north-east migrant workers and with the Special Police Unit for the north-east Region, New Delhi Police (SPUNER). Women also came together to help other vulnerable women and girls who had recently arrived in Delhi from Manipur (during the most recent conflict). In partnership with WRN, humanitarian aid was provided to sixteen displaced women from Manipur.

Women's Demands and Recommendations

1. Secure legal protection by:

- Amending legislation to include new provisions in Indian criminal law to define, criminalise and penalise racial discrimination in the country
- Ensuring the labour rights and remedies, including within OSHWCC are protected and applicable to people employed in the beauty, hospitality and service sectors, and that the grievance redressal mechanism is accessible and user-friendly.

2. Protect the right to adequate housing and other essential services by:

- Establishing more state-run working women's hostels in various parts of Delhi to provide affordable, accessible and safe housing to women migrants;
- Making rental agreements mandatory for landlords who provide houses on rent for women migrants in the city, including in Munirka and Kishangarh, Delhi;

- Relaxing the rules and requirements for ration cards in Delhi, specifically keeping in mind the additional support and assistance required by the new wave of migrants, who are largely vulnerable women who have migrated to Delhi to escape the violence being faced in the Manipur conflict.

3. Increase security and public awareness with a focus on women's safety by:

- Installing street lights and CCTV cameras in various lanes of the city, in particular in Munirka and Kishangarh, Delhi to provide safety and security for women migrants;
- Increasing police presence and presence of women police officers in Munirka and Kishangarh localities to provide accessible support and safety for women. The local government should undertake anti-racism campaigns and build awareness of the rights of the north-eastern community.

Immediately end conflicts and secure people's right to livelihood, work and dignity to stay in their own land in the North-east India.



END RACISM!

RESPECT LABOUR RIGHTS!

ENSURE ACCESS TO HOUSING AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR MIGRANT WORKERS



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK

The **Women's Regional Network** has been working with people on the move including migrants and internally displaced populations in India for 11 years. They seek to work on the right to organise and on freedom of association, to study and analyse the ways in which legislation and policies in India have impacted women migrants' right to collectivise and demand their rights.

Research by: Ananya Kundu and Priyanca Mathur, Women's Regional Network-India

Co-Researchers: Marina Lalnunmawi, Rody Dimsianmuang, Mimi Lalumpui, W. Alin and Anani Achumi

Written by: Madhu Jagdeeshan

Based on the FPAR Report Developed by WRN India

Edited and Reviewed by: Aliza Yuliana and Shardha Rajam (APWLD Migration Programme) and APWLD Secretariat

Designed by: Jericho Maravilla

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 apwld.org
 apwld@apwld.org
 [apwld.ngo](https://www.facebook.com/apwld.ngo)
 [@apwld](https://twitter.com/apwld)
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