

A case of single female labour migrants working in the low-end service jobs from North-Eastern region to the metropolitan city Chennai, India.

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Abstract : About more than half of the migration population across the globe are women. Even though women had equal participation as men in the process of migration in search of job opportunities outside their home by crossing the national and the international boundaries from the 1980's onwards, they are not given due space as a separate category in migration studies. This was brought to the notice in the 20th century. The low-end service jobs have replaced male employees with ethnic migrant women for multiple reasons. The gender, race and ethnicity are playing an equally crucial role in the hiring and recruitment of the new service sector industries. In this paper, an attempt has been made to conceptualise certain changes in the demands of skills and training that are reconstructing the image of a favourable employee desirable in the service sectors. Emphasis on the embodiment of the workers in the current global market especially is (re)establishing their demand/recruitment in specific job opportunities in the labour market. A case of the North-Eastern women working in the low-end service jobs reflects on the feminisation of migration which indirectly influences the changing labour market in India. The study has taken up the case of the migrant women workers in Chennai. The methodology of the paper is descriptive, and the required information is collected with structured questionnaire survey of 300 female migrants from the North-Eastern states working in the low-end service jobs in Chennai.

Keywords - *Gender, Migration, Embodied labour and Race, Ethnicity*

I. INTRODUCTION

Although women had been migrating before the 1980s, these movements were often neglected and not perceived as a substantial category to be researched in the migration studies. From the 1980s onwards the female migrant's experience was considered different in comparison to that of male migrants. The macro approach used earlier assumed that migration results from a labour flow caused by unequal development between the native country and the host country. (Perdraza, 1991). In contrast, a micro approach considered women as individuals and their decision to migrate as largely based on the household economy. Some implied that migration tended to (re)inforce gender in the labour market. (Omelaniuk, 2005; Zlotnik, 2003) Others suggested that migration also created opportunities for women to improve their status. (Perdraza, 1991; Onshini, 2005; Omelaniuk, 2005) Migration studies were usually biased against women because first, the data collected was based on the "head of the household" who were men. Secondly, only the male experiences were accounted for in studying migration flows – where men migrate first and then women followed. At the same time, a large number of questions arose on why the women's experience should be considered unique. This shifted the lens away from women to gender in the migration process where it was reciprocally related to the social construction of gender. Massive entries of women in the lower service jobs globally emphasise on the recent changes in the labour market. The 20th century saw the massive entry of women into the labour market through migratory moves. (Zlotnik, 2003; Debra & Helen, 2010; Nana, 2005) This was largely feminised and jobs impacted female labour migrations around the world by increasing female accessibility to it. (Macdonald and Merrill, 2008)

II. BODIES AT WORK: INTERSECTION APPROACH OF GENDER, RACE AND ETHNICITY

Globalisation has resulted in the formation of new types of labour market segmentations that highlight the gendering of the global economy. The modern era of globalisation has granted women not only the freedom and flexibility to move out of their homes but also to control women indirectly by giving specific opportunities in certain services. One of the negative effects of this restructuring in relation to the labour market was the devaluation of jobs (from full time to part time) and the feminisation of employment in these new service jobs.

(Ann brooks 2006) The service industries tend to produce jobs which can be classified into the following two categories: low skill and low pay which would constitute a large number of employees, and high skill and high pay which would constitute a lesser number of employees. The contemporary service economy categorises this service works in the areas of retail, hospitality, call centres and financial services that are inherently known to be ‘service proletariat’ or ‘emotional proletariat’ which are often stratified usually on the basis of gender, race and class. (Albin, 2010; Korczynski and Macdonald, 2008) The emergence of ‘Aesthetic labour’ refers to hiring people with certain capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers, which are then developed through training and monitoring. The employers believed that having staffs those who look good and/or sound right helped companies to create a “distinct image” and also provided a competitive advantage for the companies especially in retail and hospitality. Soft skills became a primary concern than the hard skills (the technical “know-how”). Soft skills encompassed both attitude and appearance of employees and are far more important to hospitality employers than qualifications or “hard” skills. (Nickson& Warhurst, 2007) The new skills in the training programmes reproduce an inequality dynamic in ‘new economy’ in two forms. Firstly, training was equated to a form of social control on a group of people and secondly it created a desirability of training for potentially low waged, low skilled jobs in areas such as retail and hospitality.

A profile of the North-East region of India

The North-Eastern region of India is known to be one of the exclusive regions in the Indian terrain due to its unique cultural heritage, history, language, ethnicity, and race. It shares more number of international borders in comparison to the other states of India. This has made them vulnerable to various forms of turbulence. This has resulted the negligence by the central government towards their socio-economic development in the North- eastern states. These North- Eastern states such as Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur 80 % percent of the population are ethnic tribal population in comparison to the others central states of India. Originating from the Mongolian race, these people are different in their appearance with the people of central and southern India. Geographically closer to the Chinese border and with their Mongolian appearance, they are often misunderstood as foreigners in the other states of India. McDue-Ra (2013) points out that there is an increasing population of people from the North-East who are labelled as ‘Pan Asian’ workers who are employed in the low-end service jobs in Delhi.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the process of single female migration from a specific socio-cultural milieu to the more urbanised city centres in the context of the North-Eastern states.
2. To examine the emergent labour market in the service sector in terms of the feminization of labour with its specificities.

III. METHODOLOGY

A survey method using structured questionnaire tool developed through in-depth interviewing of female migrants is employed. A sample size of 300 of the Northeast female migrant employed in the low-end service jobs in the Chennai city are chosen for the study. They are broadly categorised under three service sector such as Beauty care, Retail and Hospitality. The migrant women from the North-east are single in status and fall under the age category of 18years to 35 years. They belong to the ethnic tribes of the North-eastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. In this paper, the attempt has been made to examine the new strategies used for employing migrant women in the labour market, specifically in the emerging service sectors. For the same purpose, analysis of the gender dimensions of migration and the available opportunities and position in the current labour market in urbanised regions of India will be carried out.

IV. SOCIOCULTURAL PROFILING:

The North-eastern migrant women having a ‘Pan Asian’ look are favoured in the service jobs that requires or demands such negotiation in the cities. They are usually perceived as foreigners in the metro cities of India. The unique ethnic look gave them even higher advantages over other females who seek a job in the same industries.

Recruitment and Selection procedure

The demand is because of their distinct image and features that set the brand of a service provider on the shop floors which indirectly helped the employers to advertise or promote their shop. More than 80% of the respondents in the hospitality, retail and beauty care sector considered that appearing from the North-eastern states had given them the advantage in the initial hiring process.

Ethnic profiling before migration

The ethnicity of the employees is considered as one of the potentials for selecting and recruiting a candidate in the service sectors. Even though the low-end service sector does not directly imply any sort of segregation in the advertisement of the jobs, but it does infer certain attributes such as race, ethnicity, and gender of the candidates as preferred features. The lighter skin tone and difference of appearance due to the Mongoloid race make them such potential candidates. Soft skills such as the knowledge of the jobs, knowledge of the product, communication skill, and acquaintance with technology are not given much importance in the procedure.

The majority (38%) of the respondents in Chennai working in the service sector believed that their appearance was one of the qualities that helped them during the recruitment process. The respondents assumed that in the service sector the customer perceived the fair skin of the employees in a positive way so it acted as the symbol of a good worker who can offer better services. This has apparently increased the intake of the North-eastern migrants in both the sectors. The North-eastern females are accustomed to western outfits in comparison to the native people of Chennai turns out advantageous to them to promote the shop's products. Hence, the embodied capacities and attributes of the North-eastern women employee is a bonus that can attract the customers. The employers in the service sector felt it was easier for them to develop as well as commoditize these traits for the sale purposes. Their easy acceptance in dressing in the western outfit in their day to day lifestyle had also made them a favourable choice for many employers. Whereas, 25 % of the respondents in Chennai considered that the North-eastern female migrants depict a 'patience behaviour' while working in the service jobs and 19% of the respondents believed that staying away from families ensured lesser demands for leave that have made them the favourable choice for many employers in the service sector. The less educational qualifications, ignorance, responsibilities towards the family and younger age have played a part in making them s favourable choice in the service industries.

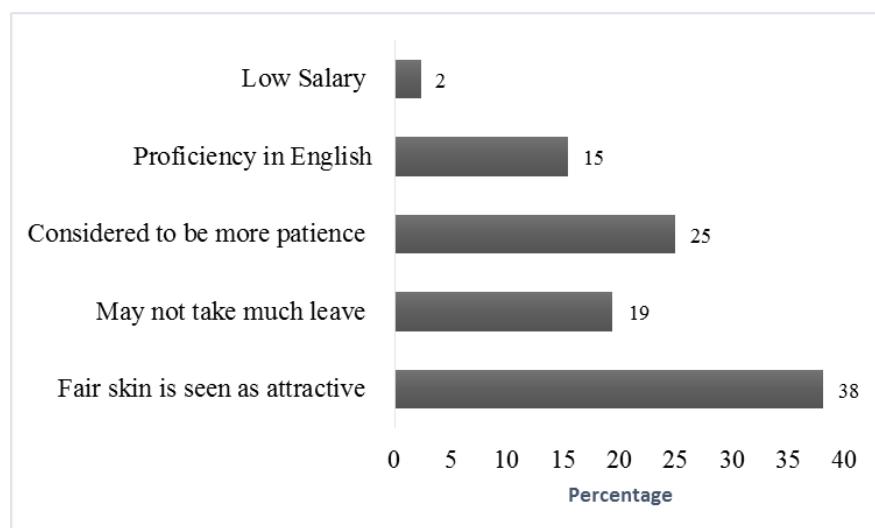


Fig 1.1 Advantages of recruiting the North- Eastern female migrants in the service sector

Social network ties before migration

Another reason for the clustering of the female migrants from the North- Eastern region are the strong social network ties. The initial points of contact for the majority (70 %) are women, which have considerable influences on the migration decisions at home. These network ties are used as a strategy to establish the route of migration and to help the entry of the migrants into the urban employment in both the service sectors. In certain cases, the eldest daughter of the family moves first, and later on, other siblings migrate following the same route. Therefore, the eldest sibling comes to the city at first, gets familiarised with the environment, and then helps the rest of the family members to migrate for the similar kind of job opportunities. Working in the low-end jobs does not often generate enough money to take care of the rest of the family, so after a point, other siblings also follow the migration pattern. It was pointed out that the lack of employment opportunities and difficulties in pursuing higher education in the North-eastern states of India have made the low-end service jobs in cities a favourable choice for these migrants.

V. GENDER ATTRIBUTES

The feminine character of the labour have become more significant and a required aptitude to perform the service work. (Steiger and Wardell 1995) Consequently, the new labour market is re-establishing such hegemonic patriarchal norms wherein women are asked to take up certain jobs that fit certain gender attributes. The respondents from the North-eastern states considered that being a woman has a positive advantage of

having greater chances of getting hired and 20% of the respondents believed that they are being paid more in the service sector such as retail, beauty care in comparison to their male counterparts for the same reason. The Figure 1.3 shown below mentions the advantages of being a woman employed in the beauty care services.

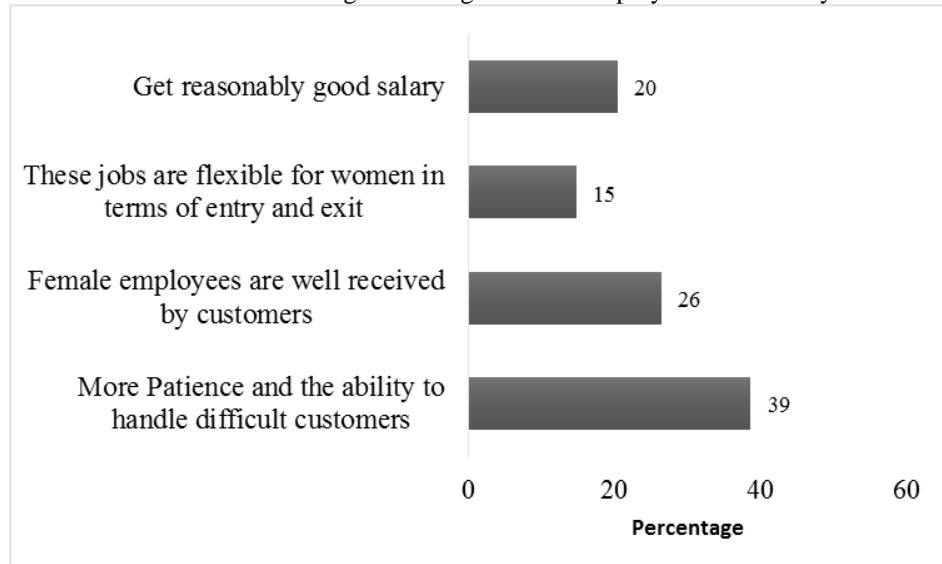


Fig1.2 Reason for women being employed in the service sector

Favourable Attributes

The ‘physical body’ of the women play a significant role, and their emotional attributes are an added advantage at work in the service sectors. 39 % of the respondents in Chennai working in the service sector considered women to be a better choice to handle difficult customers in comparison to male employees. Likewise, 26 % of the respondent in Chennai considered that women employees to be naturally equipped with the ability to handle difficult customers which gave them preference over men. Furthermore, it was observed that the customers mostly approach women employees for a suggestion or for an enquiry.

Women as ‘Docile workers.’

Their character of being docile and patient have frequently made them the desirable employees for the customers and managers. ‘Looking good’ and ‘behaving right’ is imposed on the women through the social construction of gender. The personal grooming, styling, and dressing fall under the category of feminine attributes. The physical attractiveness is important to women since people tend to equate beauty with the concepts like confidence, smartness, and success. The naturally the North-eastern women portray such an image which are easily associated with their identity and this, in turn, helps them to the find a job in the city.

Changing Definition of ‘Skill Demand And Training’ in the Emerging Service Sector:

Growing demand for the ‘aesthetic labour,’ especially in the new service sector, has changed the definition of skill and is problematic in today’s labour market. The employee’s feelings and appearance are commodified and are reshaped into favourable forms so that the employers can make a profit out of it. In this context, skills often refer to attributes such as personal presentation, grooming, and accent that are socially constructed rather than technical knowledge of the person.

Appearances and Image

The appearance and looking fresh are the other significant attributes that are essential at their workplace. The image and appearances are very important to the job roles in the service sector. For instance, in the beauty care sector, the social skill of being patient at work is a much-required attribute for the beauty therapist. The appearance and looking fresh are also accounted for at their workplace as shown in Figure 1.3. 22 % of the respondents in Chennai considered looking fresh at the workplace to be an important attribute at their workplace. 21 % of the respondents in Chennai considered ‘patience at workplace’ as an important interpersonal skill required in the service jobs. Only (17%) of the respondent in Chennai gave priority to other attributes, like the ‘communication skills,’ which is given more preference in the retail sector and hospitality rather than the beauty care. However, the communication skill is not about speaking an appropriate ‘English language’ but the ability to convey the message to the customers. In this sense, sending the right gestures to the customers that can create a positive result as much or better than speaking ‘correct English.’

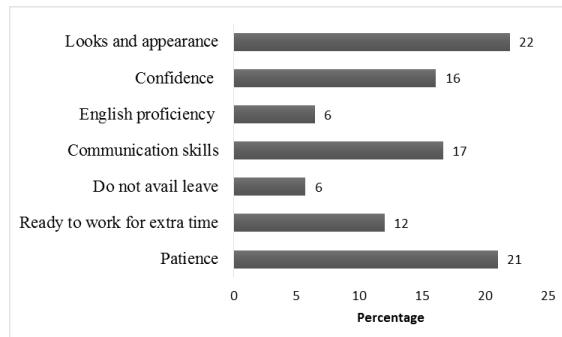


Fig 1.3 Capabilities and Attributes required in the service jobs

The service sector gives preference to training programs which are broadly classified into two categories.

Clothing policies

The service sector jobs are customer facing occupations; so employers may emphasise on the personal characteristics to the extent that they are looking for people who project the ‘right Image’ of being confident, passionate, stylish, and fashionable irrespective of the other skills they possess. The saloons, retail and restaurant generally instruct their staff to dress in particular kind of uniform. The uniform of the employees is attached to the branding of the shop. The western outfit and the make-up of the employees set up an outer image of the service to attract the customers. The service jobs recommend wearing make-up everyday at the workplace. It is strictly incorporated as a part of the dress code at the workplace. The make-up becomes the part of employee’s identity at the workplace and a daily routine needed to be followed. Hence, the physical body of the employees is used for branding the shop that attracts the customers and projects itself in uniqueness from the rest of the shops. The ‘attractiveness of the employees’ becomes a commercial benefit for the organisation in the service industries.

Physical appearances policies

The employers seek control over the employees on their language and body posture, the uniform, makeup that they wear, what part of the skin should be shown, etc. It concentrates on the physical potential of the employees rather than the employees themselves. For instance ways in which these employees can present them through posture, gesture, use personal space, facial characteristic and eye contact. The dress code and uniform are essential and are strictly monitored by the employer or the manager at the work floor. It was part of their daily routine behaviour on the work floor. Although service sector jobs require certain type of training skills to perform but still are considered to be lowered in the standard of skill in comparison to other jobs in the market. It requires little training. The work are highly routinized and more of job specific. This is visible in the education qualification of the female migrant from the Northeastern states working in the low end jobs. The majority (51%) of the respondents are able to complete their class 10th and 38 % of the respondents have completed their class 12th. Only. Therefore, they do not have any sort of certification course or diploma certificate for being hired in the new service jobs; instead, mere appearances have made them favourable employees in the low-end service sector.

VI. CONCLUSION

Migration has empowered women to move outside their home and to live independently. The change in the labour market has increased the female migration by giving them the opportunity in the low-end service jobs. This has also stereotyped women into specific positions in the labour market by feminising the required skills set in low-end service jobs. It has (re)constructed and prioritised the significance of the gender, race and ethnicity of the worker over technical knowledge. The sustainability and progress are limited in the service sector. The embodied labour training program is very job specific, and it becomes difficult for them to have career growth. These jobs being informal in nature, are generally having flexible rules and norms that favour the employers which make the situation of the female workers vulnerable and insecure. The duration of the career in the low-end service sector for female migrants from the North-Eastern region is about 12 years which leaves them with lesser chances of earning a higher salary and limits the chances of growth in their employment.

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