Journal of Socioeconomic and Contemporary Review

Volume: 6 Issue: 2
(April-June) 2026
(ISSN: 2791-2612)

KMF PUBLISHERS

www.kmf-publishers.com/jscr/

Journal of Socioeconomic and Contemporary Review

Volume. 6 Issue 02 (2026)

Research Article

OPEN

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v6i2.jscr.7

Gendered Dimensions of Migration: A Feminist Sociological Review

Dr Khandaker Mursheda Farhana[1], Bushra Islam[2]

Abstract

This article provides a feminist sociological review of the gendered dimensions of migration, with particular emphasis on Bangladesh within a comparative South Asian context. Drawing on a qualitative systematic literature review of scholarly publications, policy reports, and international migration data, the study critically examines how migration is structured through intersecting systems of gender, labour market segmentation, legal precarity, and transnational care regimes. The analysis demonstrates that female migration from Bangladesh and neighbouring South Asian countries is deeply embedded in global care chains that redistribute reproductive labour from poorer households to wealthier economies, while simultaneously reinforcing structural inequalities. Migrant women are disproportionately concentrated in informal and feminised sectors such as domestic work and caregiving, where legal protections remain limited under restrictive sponsorship systems. However, the article moves beyond victim-centred narratives to highlight migrant women's agency, identity negotiation, and transnational practices of resilience. Through remittance contributions, digital connectivity, and everyday resistance strategies, migrant women reshape household power relations and challenge normative gender expectations. The review argues that migration must be understood as a gendered social process shaped by global capitalism and state governance, yet mediated by women's relational and situated agency. The article concludes by outlining policy implications for rights-based labour governance, regional cooperation, and the recognition of care work as essential social infrastructure.

Keywords: Environmental justice; Human rights; Coastal Bangladesh; Climate justice; Vulnerability; Disaster governance

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Uttara, Dhaka-1230, Bangladesh, Email: drfarhanamannan@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1526-6147
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Dhaka International University (DIU), Satarkul, Badda, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh, Email: bushra.soc@diu.ac

1. Introduction

Migration is one of the most transformative social processes of the modern era, reshaping economies, families, citizenship regimes, and cultural identities across national borders. While migration has long occupied a central position in sociological inquiry, early theoretical frameworks largely conceptualised migrants as gender-neutral actors responding to economic incentives or structural pressures (Lee, 1966; Massey et al., 1993). Such approaches often treated labour migration as a rational decision undertaken by male household heads, implicitly positioning women as dependents or passive followers. Feminist sociologists have critically challenged this androcentric bias, arguing that migration is deeply embedded in gendered power relations that structure mobility, labour incorporation, and transnational social life (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Morokvasic, 1984).

Over the past four decades, feminist scholarship has transformed migration studies by foregrounding gender as a constitutive-not peripheral-dimension of mobility. Gender shapes who migrates, under what conditions, through which legal channels, and into which sectors of the labour market. It also structures migrants' experiences of exploitation, agency, belonging, and resistance. Women today constitute nearly half of the global migrant population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2020), and in several migration corridors, they migrate independently as primary income earners rather than as family dependents. The growing feminisation of migration reflects broader transformations in global capitalism, including the expansion of care economies, service industries, and precarious labour markets (Sassen, 2000).

Feminist sociological research has demonstrated that migration is not only gendered but also gender-producing. Migration processes reconfigure household power dynamics, challenge patriarchal norms, and generate new forms of femininity and masculinity across transnational spaces (Parreñas, 2001). At the same time, migration regimes frequently reproduce structural inequalities by channelling migrant women into undervalued and informal sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, and hospitality (Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). These patterns reveal the intersection of patriarchy and global capitalism in shaping transnational labour hierarchies.

Beyond labour market incorporation, gender influences legal status, access to citizenship, and vulnerability to violence. Dependent visa systems, family reunification policies, and restrictive work permits often tie women's legal status to male sponsors, reinforcing patriarchal dependency structures (Farhana & Mannan, 2023; Kofman et al., 2000). Moreover, migrant women, particularly those who are racialised or undocumented, face heightened risks of exploitation,

trafficking, and gender-based violence (Anthias, 2000). Such vulnerabilities cannot be understood solely through economic frameworks; they require analysis of intersecting systems of power.

The emergence of transnational migration studies in the 1990s further deepened feminist contributions by conceptualising migrants as actors embedded in cross-border social fields (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Feminist scholars highlighted the emotional and social dimensions of transnational caregiving, coining the concept of "global care chains" to describe the redistribution of reproductive labour across borders (Hochschild, 2000). Migrant mothers often provide care in wealthier countries while delegating childcare responsibilities to relatives in their countries of origin, producing layered chains of gendered labour and emotional strain (Parreñas, 2001). These insights shifted migration research beyond remittances and wage differentials to include social reproduction and affective labour.

Intersectionality theory has further enriched feminist migration scholarship by demonstrating that gender cannot be analysed in isolation from race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and legal status (Crenshaw, 1989). Migrant women's experiences vary significantly depending on their position within global racial and economic hierarchies. For example, professional women migrants may experience deskilling due to racialised credential recognition systems, while low-wage domestic workers encounter both labour exploitation and social marginalisation (Anthias, 2000). Intersectional analysis thus reveals migration as a site where multiple axes of inequality converge.

Despite these advances, important theoretical and methodological gaps remain. Much feminist migration research has concentrated on domestic workers and care labour, sometimes overshadowing other sectors such as manufacturing, technology, and climate-induced displacement. Additionally, Western-centric epistemologies have often dominated theoretical production, marginalising perspectives from the Global South. Contemporary migration challenges-including climate change, digital labour migration, and anti-migrant nationalism-require renewed feminist theoretical engagement.

This article provides a comprehensive feminist sociological review of migration, examining how gender structures mobility, labour markets, citizenship regimes, and transnational identities. It synthesises key theoretical traditions and critically evaluates their contributions and limitations. By integrating feminist political economy, intersectionality, transnational feminism, and social reproduction theory, the article advances a multidimensional framework for understanding migration as a gendered and socially transformative process. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about inequality, globalisation, and the restructuring of social life in the twenty-first century.

2. Theoretical Background

The incorporation of gender into migration theory represents one of the most significant paradigm shifts in sociological scholarship over the past four decades. Early migration theories-particularly neoclassical economic models and push–pull frameworks-largely conceptualised migration as an individual or household-level response to wage differentials and structural imbalances (Lee, 1966; Massey et al., 1993). These models assumed rational actors operating within gender-neutral labour markets, thereby obscuring the patriarchal and racialised structures that shape mobility. Feminist scholars critiqued these assumptions, arguing that migration is embedded within systems of gendered power that influence both decision-making processes and outcomes (Morokvasic, 1984).

This section outlines four interrelated theoretical traditions that form the foundation of feminist migration analysis: feminist political economy, intersectionality, transnational feminism, and social reproduction theory. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the gendered dimensions of migration.

2.1 Feminist Political Economy

Feminist political economy situates migration within the broader context of global capitalism and neoliberal restructuring. Unlike neoclassical approaches that emphasise individual choice, feminist political economists highlight structural inequalities in the global division of labour (Sassen, 2000). The restructuring of economies in both the Global North and South, through structural adjustment programs, export-oriented industrialisation, and privatisation, has generated new demands for low-wage, flexible labour disproportionately filled by migrant women.

Sassen (2000) argues that global cities function as strategic sites where high-income professional sectors depend on low-paid service and care workers. Migrant women, often from economically marginalised regions, fill these positions due to intersecting inequalities of gender, race, and citizenship. This labour segmentation reflects what Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) describe as the globalisation of women's work, in which care and domestic labour are commodified across borders.

Feminist political economy also critiques the undervaluation of reproductive labour within capitalist systems. Paid domestic work, caregiving, and hospitality services remain structurally devalued despite being essential to sustaining economies (Federici, 2012). Migrant women's concentration in these sectors demonstrates how patriarchal norms and capitalist imperatives converge to produce gendered labour hierarchies. Migration thus becomes both a survival strategy and a mechanism through which global inequalities are reproduced.

2.2 Intersectionality and Multiple Inequalities

Intersectionality theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical lens for analysing how gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and legal status. In migration studies, intersectionality reveals that women's experiences are not homogeneous. For instance, middle-class professional migrants may encounter barriers to credential recognition and racial discrimination, while undocumented domestic workers face deportability and labour exploitation (Anthias, 2000).

Intersectionality challenges the tendency to treat "migrant women" as a singular category. Instead, it emphasises the multiplicity of social positions that shape migration trajectories. Migrant women of colour in Europe and North America often confront racialised stereotypes that confine them to specific labour niches, reinforcing occupational segregation (Kofman et al., 2000). Legal status further compounds these inequalities, as temporary or tied visas restrict mobility and labour rights.

By foregrounding intersecting power structures, intersectionality expands feminist migration theory beyond gender alone. It highlights how global hierarchies of race and nationality structure access to mobility and rights, making migration both a product and producer of inequality.

2.3 Transnational Feminism

Transnational migration studies emerged in the 1990s as scholars recognised that migrants maintain simultaneous ties to origin and destination countries (Basch et al., 1994). Feminist scholars contributed significantly to this paradigm by emphasising the gendered nature of transnational practices.

Transnational feminism critiques methodological nationalism-the assumption that social processes are confined within nation-state boundaries- and instead conceptualises migrants as embedded in cross-border social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Migrant women participate in remittance flows, community organisations, and caregiving networks that span continents. These transnational practices reshape gender norms within families and communities.

Parreñas (2001) demonstrates how Filipina domestic workers construct transnational motherhood, sustaining emotional ties through communication technologies and periodic visits. Such arrangements challenge traditional notions of co-residential family structures. However, they also produce emotional strain and moral dilemmas.

Transnational feminism further interrogates global power relations in knowledge production, arguing that Western frameworks often marginalise voices from the Global South. It calls for decolonising migration studies by centring migrant women's lived experiences and epistemologies.

2.4 Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory focuses on the unpaid and paid labour necessary to sustain daily life and reproduce the labour force (Bhattacharya, 2017). Feminist scholars argue that migration redistributes reproductive labour across global hierarchies, creating "global care chains" (Hochschild, 2000).

In these chains, women from poorer countries migrate to provide care in wealthier households, leaving their own children in the care of relatives or paid workers. This layered system reflects structural inequalities between nations and social classes (Parreñas, 2001). Care deficits in sending countries are often filled by even poorer women, extending the chain further.

Social reproduction theory underscores how states externalise welfare responsibilities to migrant women's labour. As public services shrink under neoliberalism, private households rely on migrant caregivers. Migration thus becomes integral to sustaining global capitalism.

2.5 Gendered Citizenship and the State

Migration regimes are not gender-neutral. Citizenship laws, family reunification policies, and labour visas often embed patriarchal assumptions (Kofman et al., 2000). Dependent visa categories restrict women's employment rights, reinforcing economic dependency.

Moreover, border enforcement practices disproportionately impact migrant women who are trafficked or subjected to exploitation. Feminist scholars argue that states regulate migrant women's sexuality and reproduction through restrictive policies.

2.6 Emerging Theoretical Directions

Recent scholarship extends feminist migration theory into new domains, including climate migration, digital labour mobility, and LGBTQ+ migration. Climate change disproportionately affects women in vulnerable regions, shaping forced migration patterns. Additionally, queer migration studies highlight how sexuality intersects with asylum regimes.

These emerging directions suggest that feminist migration theory must remain dynamic, responsive to evolving global challenges.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative systematic literature review to critically analyse the gendered dimensions of migration and the dynamics of global care chains within the South Asian context, with a focus on Bangladesh alongside India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Qualitative systematic literature reviews involve an interpretive synthesis of scholarly publications to identify themes, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual gaps (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). Unlike quantitative meta-analyses that aggregate numerical outcomes, qualitative reviews emphasise meaning, context, and

theory-building, making them particularly suited for sociological inquiries into gender, labour, and transnational migration (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014).

The rationale for employing a qualitative systematic review in this research is twofold. First, feminist migration studies encompass diverse epistemologies and methodological approaches that cannot be effectively distilled through quantitative aggregation alone (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2020). Second, the literature on global care chains and gendered labour in South Asia intersects transnational sociology, feminist political economy, and migration studies, warranting interpretive thematic synthesis (Vertovec, 2007; Sultana, 2020).

3.1 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically across multiple electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of social science and gender studies. Search terms were defined to capture the intersections of gender, migration, and care work within South Asia. Primary keywords included:

- "gender AND migration"
- "care work AND global care chains"
- "feminisation of migration AND South Asia"
- "Bangladesh migrant domestic workers"
- "transnational caregiving AND South Asia"
- "gendered labour migration AND Asia"

Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) and truncation were used to broaden and refine the search, following systematic review protocols (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Additionally, reference lists of selected core texts were manually reviewed to identify additional relevant sources (backward snowballing).

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles and reports were screened based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Published in peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, or reputable institutional reports (e.g., ILO, UN Women).
- Published between **2000 and 2024**, with priority on recent research (2020–2024) to capture contemporary developments (ILO, 2020; UN Women, 2023).
- Focus on gendered experiences of migration, care work, or global care chains.
- Empirical, conceptual, or theoretical orientation grounded in sociological analysis.
- case studies or comparative insights relevant to South Asia.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Quantitative-only studies without broader thematic discussion.

- Articles focused solely on non-South Asian contexts (unless comparative with South Asia).
- Editorials, opinion pieces, and non-scholarly blogs.

3.3 Data Extraction

Data extraction was carried out using a structured framework comprising the following elements:

- Citation (Author, Year, Journal)
- Geographical Focus
- Research Objective
- Theoretical Framework
- Methodological Approach
- Key Findings/Themes
- Relation to Gendered Migration or Care Chains

This facilitated the systematic categorisation of literature and ensured consistency across thematic coding.

3.4 Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

The synthesis followed an inductive thematic analysis inspired by feminist social science methodologies (Charmaz, 2014). Themes were identified through multiple rounds of reading and coding, supported by NVivo qualitative analysis software. Through coding, major thematic clusters emerged, including:

- Gendered labour segmentation
- Care chains and social reproduction
- Policy and legal regulation
- Migrant women's agency and resistance
- Comparative South Asian experiences

Themes were then cross-analysed to identify conceptual linkages, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. Reflexive memoing was used to document the interpretive process and researcher positionality, enhancing analytical transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sultana, 2021).

3.5 Quality Assessment and Credibility

To assess the scholarly quality of sources, each publication was evaluated for:

- Theoretical rigour and conceptual clarity
- Methodological transparency
- Use of evidence and empirical grounding
- Contribution to the field of gender and migration

While systematic reviews typically involve quality scoring, qualitative synthesis places greater emphasis on interpretive depth and theoretical contribution rather than numerical indicators (Mays et al., 2005). High-quality texts were those that integrated feminist theoretical frameworks with sociological insight.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Because this review synthesises publicly available academic and policy literature, no human subjects were directly involved, and ethical approval was not required. However, ethical considerations were maintained in representation and interpretation. Specifically, the analysis avoids reinforcing stereotypes about migrant women as passive victims by

foregrounding agency, resilience, and structural context (Anthias, 2013). A feminist ethics of care approach guided synthesis, prioritising dignity, relationality, and intersectional understanding (Tronto, 2013).

3.7 Limitations

The methodology is limited by its reliance on published literature, which may underrepresent grey literature and non-English scholarship from South Asia. Additionally, secondary data does not capture first-person narratives not yet been documented in research publications. Nonetheless, the thematic breadth and regional focus offer significant conceptual insight into gendered migration and care work dynamics.

4. Global Care Chains

The term *global care chains* was first articulated by Arlie Hochschild to describe a series of personal links between people across the globe based on paid and unpaid care work (Hochschild, 2000). Care chains are a subset of global labour chains where caregiving responsibilities are transferred across national borders. Typically, women from poorer countries migrate to care for children, elders, and disabled persons in wealthier countries, leaving caregiving gaps in their home communities filled by other women (often from lower socioeconomic strata) or older relatives (Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2009).

In this model, caregiving is not merely a labour activity but a social process deeply embedded in gendered norms, political economies, and migration governance. Care chains reveal how states, markets, families, and gendered subjects co-produce global inequalities.

4.1 Feminist Political Economy and Care Chains

Feminist political economy situates global care chains within neoliberal globalisation processes. In South Asia, structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s dismantled state welfare provisions, increasing reliance on private households to secure care services (Benería & Roldán, 1987; Razavi, 2007). As welfare retrenchment occurred in destination countries, demand for inexpensive care labour increased, driving the transnational recruitment of women from the Global South (Sassen, 2000; Yeates, 2009).

In Bangladesh, labour export policies have actively promoted female migration as a strategy for foreign remittance inflows (Khatun & Roy, 2021). In parallel, countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka have long histories of female labour migration to the Gulf States and Malaysia, facilitated by state migration bureaus and private agencies (Piper, 2020). However, these policies rarely account for the social reproduction costs borne by sending communities.

4.2 Regional Patterns of Care Chain Formation

Bangladesh: Bangladesh has witnessed rapid growth in female migration since the early 2000s, especially to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Southeast Asia (Huda, 2014; Khan et

al., 2022). According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), female migrant workers increased by over 300% between 2010 and 2022, with domestic work and caregiving constituting a significant share (BMET, 2023). Accounts from returnee women highlight long working hours, wage delays, and restricted mobility, shaping the gendered contours of care labour (Siddiqua & Rashid, 2021).

Moreover, migration researchers argue that Bangladesh's reliance on female care work exports has reinforced social hierarchies where women are expected to absorb household care responsibilities before migration and manage familial care post-migration through remittance provisioning (Rahman, 2020; Sultana, 2022).

India: India's care-worker diaspora includes nurses, domestic workers, and caregiving specialists mainly in the GCC, Europe, and East Asia (Hall & Ryan, 2018; Samaddar, 2021). Indian women's migration is structured by caste, class, and linguistic hierarchies that shape access to legal protection and labour rights abroad (Desai & Banerjee, 2020). Studies show that Indian women often navigate precarious contractual terms, confining them to low-paid domestic sectors despite professional qualifications (Muslim et al., 2021; Karn & Koka, 2023).

Nepal: Nepal's migration landscape is dominated by male labour migrants, but female participation has increased, particularly in domestic work in the Gulf and Malaysia (Maharjan, 2016; Gartaula et al., 2021). Female migrants from Nepal often face employer dependency systems that restrict freedom and exacerbate isolation, leading to psychosocial stress and vulnerability to abuse (Thapa & Sæther, 2020). Remittance flows have become central to household economies, reshaping gender roles back home as women assume greater decision-making authority (Adhikari & Estes, 2023).

Pakistan and Sri Lanka: In Pakistan, women's migration is shaped by family reunification and marriage migration as well as care work, raising complex issues around legal status and social integration in destination countries (Shah, 2022). Sri Lanka shares a longer history of female domestic worker migration, especially to the Middle East, where employer sponsorship systems have been widely criticised for fostering exploitation (Jayawardena & Munasinghe, 2020). Recent studies point to increased advocacy by civil society organisations for legal protections and reintegration support (Wickramasinghe & Fernando, 2024).

4.3 Care Chains and Social Reproduction

Central to global care chain analysis is the concept of *social reproduction*, defined as the processes that sustain life - including childcare, elder care, health maintenance, and emotional support (Bhattacharya, 2017). Migration redistributes these duties transnationally. Feminist scholars argue that care chains are not merely economic exchanges but involve

emotional labour, moral obligation, and social identities (Parreñas, 2015).

In South Asia, care chain dynamics intersect with caste, class, and rural–urban divides. Women from rural or economically marginalised backgrounds are disproportionately represented in care labour migration, indicating structural inequalities that extend beyond national borders (Sultana & Rahman, 2021). The absence of robust social welfare systems further compels families to outsource care responsibilities through migration and remittances, perpetuating cycles of labour commodification.

4.4 Gendered Precarity and Legal Regimes

Care workers in South Asia encounter intersecting forms of precarity - legal, economic, and social. Dependent visa regimes and employer-centred sponsorship systems in GCC countries limit workers' freedom and expose them to abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Feminist analyses highlight how these policies reproduce patriarchal controls over women's mobility, labour rights, and bodily autonomy (Khan et al., 2023).

Moreover, the gendered dimensions of legal exclusion mean that women may not have access to formal dispute resolution, labour unions, or social protections that mitigate exploitation. Studies from Bangladesh and Nepal show that women migrants face challenges in accessing legal redress due to language barriers, fear of repatriation, and lack of support networks (Begum & Rahman, 2021; Adhikari et al., 2024).

4.5 Remittances, Care Deficits, and Family Reconfiguration

Remittances are often lauded for their economic contributions, but feminist scholars emphasise that they also compensate for care deficits in sending communities (Sultana, 2020; Rashid & Siddiqua, 2022). Migrant women send economic support home, yet the social labour of caregiving - emotional guidance, physical presence, community engagement - remains unmatched by monetary transfer alone.

Within families, remittance inflows can shift power relations. Women who migrate and remit often gain greater say in household decisions, challenging traditional patriarchal norms (Gartaula et al., 2021). However, this empowerment coexists with the emotional costs of separation and intergenerational strain.

4.6 Agency, Resistance, and Collective Mobilisation

Despite structural constraints, migrant care workers exercise agency in diverse ways: negotiating contracts, building social networks, participating in migrant worker collectives, and advocating for labour rights. Civil society organisations and diaspora groups in South Asia have increasingly become platforms for knowledge exchange, legal support, and transnational activism (Piper & Lohmann, 2023).

In Bangladesh, domestic worker associations have lobbied for legal

recognition and protection of migrant domestic labourers, leading to policy discussions at the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (Sultana & Ahmed, 2023). Similar collective efforts in Nepal and Sri Lanka reflect regional patterns of migrant advocacy.

4.7 Theoretical and Policy Implications

The regional comparative analysis of global care chains suggests that gendered migration cannot be understood without considering transnational labour demands, state policies, and social reproduction needs. Policy frameworks must address legal protection, social welfare, and gender-sensitive labour regulations to mitigate precarity and enhance social justice (ILO, 2023; UN Women, 2023).

Global care chains in South Asia reflect deeply gendered labour dynamics shaped by patriarchal norms, neoliberal policies, and transnational labour demands. While migration offers economic opportunities, it also produces layered care deficits, legal vulnerabilities, and social reproduction burdens that extend across borders. A feminist sociological analysis reveals both structural inequalities and migrant agency, underscoring the need for policies that centre gender justice and social protection.

5. Labour Market Segmentation and Gender in South Asian Migration

Labour market segmentation theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how migrants are incorporated into host economies through structured inequalities rather than neutral market processes. Classical segmentation theory distinguishes between primary labour markets, characterised by stability, high wages, and mobility, and secondary labour markets marked by insecurity, low wages, and limited protections (Piore, 1979). Feminist sociologists have extended this framework by demonstrating that segmentation is not only economic but also gendered, racialised, and stratified along lines of citizenship (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Kofman et al., 2000).

In the South Asian context, labour migration from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka illustrates how global labour markets are deeply structured by gender hierarchies. Women migrants are disproportionately concentrated in domestic work, caregiving, garment manufacturing, hospitality, and low-wage service sectors, while men dominate construction, transport, and heavy industry (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020). This occupational channelling reflects global gender norms, migration governance regimes, and employer preferences shaped by racialised and gendered stereotypes (Piper, 2020).

5.1 Feminisation of Low-Wage Labour

The feminisation of migration in South Asia has been closely linked to the feminisation of low-wage service labour. As global economies expanded their demand for flexible and precarious labour, migrant women became central to sustaining care economies and informal service sectors (Sassen, 2000; Yeates, 2009). In Bangladesh, female labour migration has grown significantly over the past decade, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (BMET, 2023). However, this increase has not translated into upward occupational mobility; rather, it has reinforced vertical segmentation within labour markets.

Labour market segmentation theory explains this pattern through structural demand: destination economies create niches for migrant women in undervalued reproductive labour. These roles are considered "natural" extensions of women's domestic responsibilities, thereby justifying low wages and minimal protections (Federici, 2012). Feminist scholars argue that this normalisation of care work obscures its economic value and perpetuates gender inequality (Bhattacharya, 2017).

In India, migrant nurses and domestic workers face similar segmentation. Even when possessing professional credentials, many encounter deskilling due to racialised labour hierarchies and restrictive visa categories (Desai & Banerjee, 2020). Likewise, Nepali women working as caregivers in the Gulf report employer-imposed mobility restrictions that confine them to household spaces (Adhikari et al., 2024). These patterns illustrate how labour segmentation operates through intersecting axes of gender, race, and citizenship.

5.2 Informality and Precarious Work

A defining feature of gendered labour segmentation is informality. Informal work lacks formal contracts, social protection, and legal recourse, conditions disproportionately affecting migrant women (ILO, 2020). Domestic work in particular remains excluded from many labour codes, reinforcing vulnerability to wage theft, excessive hours, and abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In Bangladesh and Nepal, migration brokers often channel women into informal sectors abroad through recruitment fees and debt arrangements, embedding financial precarity into migration trajectories (Sultana & Rahman, 2021). Feminist political economy emphasises that informality is not accidental but structurally produced through neoliberal deregulation and employer-driven demand for cheap labour (Standing, 2011). Migrant women thus occupy what some scholars term "hyper-precarious" positions-simultaneously marginalised by gender norms, legal exclusion, and labour market hierarchies (Khan et al., 2023).

5.3 Occupational Stereotypes and Gender Norms

Occupational segregation is reinforced by cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. Employers often perceive South Asian women as obedient, nurturing, and suitable for caregiving roles, while men are deemed physically suited for construction and industrial labour (Anthias, 2000). These stereotypes shape recruitment practices and state-level migration agreements.

In Sri Lanka, for example, female domestic workers have long been recruited under bilateral agreements emphasising their caregiving "skills," despite limited formal training (Jayawardena & Munasinghe, 2020). Similarly, Pakistani women migrating through marriage or family reunification channels often find themselves confined to unpaid domestic labour, limiting economic autonomy (Shah, 2022).

Such gendered expectations extend into migrant-sending communities. Women migrants may face social stigma or moral scrutiny for working abroad, particularly in domestic roles perceived as subordinate (Rahman, 2020). Thus, labour market segmentation is reinforced by both transnational labour demand and local patriarchal norms.

5.4 Wage Inequality and Remittance Economies

Gender wage gaps persist within migrant labour markets. Studies indicate that female migrant workers from South Asia earn significantly less than their male counterparts, even when controlling for hours worked (ILO, 2023). This wage disparity reflects both occupational segregation and undervaluation of care work.

Despite lower wages, remittances from female migrants constitute a critical component of household survival in Bangladesh and Nepal (Gartaula et al., 2021). Feminist scholars caution against romanticising remittances as empowerment; while they may enhance women's bargaining power within households, they do not necessarily dismantle structural labour inequalities (Rashid & Siddiqua, 2022).

5.5 Intersectionality and Segmented Mobility

Intersectionality deepens segmentation analysis by highlighting differential mobility opportunities within gender categories (Crenshaw, 1989). Middle-class Indian nurses migrating to Europe may access professional pathways unavailable to rural Bangladeshi domestic workers (Karn & Koka, 2023). Similarly, caste, religion, and ethnicity shape occupational outcomes across South Asia.

For instance, Dalit women in India often face layered discrimination, limiting upward mobility even within migrant networks (Desai & Banerjee, 2020). In Bangladesh, rural women from economically marginalised districts dominate domestic labour migration streams (Sultana, 2020). These patterns underscore how segmentation is both gendered and socially stratified.

Labour market segmentation in South Asian migration reflects structural inequalities embedded within global capitalism and patriarchal norms. Migrant women are concentrated in informal, undervalued sectors characterised by precarious employment and limited mobility. While migration may offer income-generating opportunities, it simultaneously reproduces gender hierarchies across borders. A feminist sociological perspective reveals segmentation not as a neutral market outcome but as a socially constructed and institutionally reinforced process.

6. Citizenship, Legal Status, and Gendered Precarity

Citizenship and legal status play a pivotal role in structuring migrant experiences. Feminist migration scholarship argues that migration regimes are deeply gendered, embedding patriarchal assumptions within visa categories, sponsorship systems, and labour laws (Kofman et al., 2000). In South Asia, women migrants often navigate restrictive legal frameworks that intensify precarity and vulnerability.

6.1 Dependent Visas and Patriarchal Control

Dependent visa systems are a central mechanism of gendered legal stratification. Women migrating under spousal or family reunification categories frequently lack independent work authorisation, reinforcing economic dependency (Shah, 2022). This dynamic is evident among Pakistani and Indian women in the Gulf and Europe, where legal status is tied to male sponsors.

Such arrangements reproduce patriarchal power relations transnationally. Feminist theorists argue that citizenship regimes regulate not only labour but also family structures and gender norms (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). Women's legal precarity can limit their ability to exit abusive relationships or exploitative workplaces.

6.2 Employer Sponsorship Systems

The kafala (sponsorship) system in GCC countries exemplifies how legal regimes institutionalise dependency. Under kafala, migrant workers' legal status is tied to employers, restricting mobility and enabling exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Female domestic workers from Bangladesh and Nepal often report passport confiscation, contract substitution, and confinement (Adhikari et al., 2024).

Feminist analyses highlight how kafala regimes intersect with gender norms, situating domestic workers within private households where labour inspections are limited (Khan et al., 2023). The private sphere becomes a site of unregulated labour, blurring boundaries between employment and servitude.

6.3 Irregular Status and Deportability

Legal precarity extends to undocumented migrants. Deportability, defined as the constant threat of removal, shapes daily life and labour

negotiations (De Genova, 2002). Women migrants in irregular situations may avoid reporting abuse due to fear of detention or deportation (Begum & Rahman, 2021).

In Bangladesh, returnee domestic workers often describe being repatriated without receiving unpaid wages, underscoring limited access to legal remedies (Siddiqua & Rashid, 2021). The structural vulnerability associated with irregular status compounds gendered risks.

6.4 Access to Social Protection

Citizenship status determines access to healthcare, social security, and labour rights. Many destination countries exclude migrant domestic workers from social protection schemes (ILO, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant women in care sectors faced heightened exposure to health risks without adequate safety nets (Piper & Lohmann, 2023).

In South Asia, reintegration policies for returnee women remain limited. Bangladesh's Expatriates' Welfare policies have expanded training programs, yet social protection coverage remains uneven (Khatun & Roy, 2021). Without robust reintegration frameworks, returnee women may face economic marginalisation and social stigma.

6.5 Citizenship as Social Belonging

Beyond legal documentation, citizenship encompasses social belonging and recognition (Bosniak, 2006). Migrant women often experience social exclusion in host societies due to language barriers, racialization, and cultural stereotypes. Feminist scholars argue that social citizenship-participation in civic and community life-is as critical as legal status (Lister, 2007).

In Nepal and Sri Lanka, returnee women migrants may encounter reintegration challenges, including community suspicion or altered gender expectations (Gartaula et al., 2021). Thus, precarity operates both abroad and upon return.

6.6 Agency and Legal Advocacy

Despite structural constraints, migrant women mobilise collectively to challenge legal injustices. Domestic worker associations in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka advocate for ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 on domestic workers' rights (ILO, 2011; Sultana & Ahmed, 2023). Transnational activism networks have pressured Gulf states to reform sponsorship systems, though implementation remains uneven (Piper, 2020).

Legal literacy programs and NGO partnerships have expanded awareness of rights among migrant women, demonstrating forms of resistance within constrained legal regimes.

Citizenship and legal status profoundly shape gendered precarity in South Asian migration. Dependent visas, sponsorship systems, and exclusion from social protections embed structural inequalities within migration governance. Yet migrant women's agency and advocacy efforts reveal possibilities for reform. A feminist

sociological lens underscores the need to reconceptualise citizenship beyond formal documentation toward inclusive social and economic rights.

7. Migrant Women's Agency and Identity

The feminisation of migration literature has progressively shifted from representing migrant women solely as victims of exploitation to recognising them as complex social actors whose agency is embedded within structural constraints (Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Kofman, 2014). In the context of Bangladesh and South Asia, migrant women's agency is often exercised in tension with patriarchal norms, labour market segmentation, and restrictive migration regimes. A feminist sociological perspective insists that agency must not be romanticised as pure autonomy, nor reduced to survival strategies; rather, it must be understood as relational, negotiated, and situated within intersecting structures of power (Crenshaw, 1991; Anthias, 2012).

7.1 Rethinking Agency Beyond Victimhood

Earlier migration scholarship frequently portrayed female migrant domestic workers from Bangladesh, Nepal, or Sri Lanka as passive victims of trafficking, abuse, or economic desperation (Piper, 2008). While structural vulnerabilities are undeniable, especially in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, recent feminist research argues that such narratives obscure migrant women's strategic decision-making and aspirations (Yeoh, Huang, & Lam, 2005; Rahman & Lian, 2022).

In Bangladesh, women's labour migration to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates has grown significantly since the 2010s (BMET, 2023). Many women enter domestic work despite social stigma, negotiating familial opposition and moral anxieties. Migration becomes a pathway to renegotiate gender hierarchies within the household. Studies show that remittance contributions often elevate women's bargaining power in family decision-making, including children's education and land purchases (Siddiqui, 2019; Afsar & Rahman, 2021).

However, agency here is not absolute empowerment. It is a form of "constrained agency," shaped by structural inequalities (Kabeer, 1999). Women may choose migration within limited options, yet that choice can still represent resistance to poverty and patriarchal confinement. Feminist sociology, therefore, conceptualises migrant agency as both strategic and situated.

7.2 Transnational Motherhood and Emotional Labour

One of the most profound dimensions of migrant women's identity in South Asia is transnational motherhood. When Bangladeshi women migrate as domestic workers, they frequently leave children in the care of grandparents or female relatives. This creates emotional paradoxes: migration enables financial provision but disrupts daily caregiving (Parreñas, 2005).

Global care chain literature has documented how migrant mothers engage in "long-distance mothering" through remittances, digital communication, and periodic visits (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2015). In Bangladesh, digital connectivity-WhatsApp, IMO, Facebook Messenger-has transformed emotional maintenance practices (Rahman, 2023). Yet emotional strain persists. Migrant women often internalise guilt and social criticism, especially in conservative rural communities where maternal presence is culturally valorised.

Feminist scholars argue that such emotional labour is part of a broader moral economy of migration (Constable, 2014). Women's identities are negotiated between breadwinner and caregiver roles, challenging traditional gender norms. Migration thus reconfigures femininity: women become transnational economic actors while still being expected to uphold maternal responsibilities.

7.3 Negotiating Patriarchy Across Borders

Migration does not simply liberate women from patriarchal structures; it relocates them within new hierarchies (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Bangladeshi domestic workers in the Middle East operate within the kafala sponsorship system, which ties legal status to employers and restricts mobility (ILO, 2022). These structural constraints limit formal autonomy but do not eliminate informal forms of negotiation.

Qualitative studies from Bangladesh and Nepal show that migrant women develop strategies such as building informal support networks, switching employers through intermediaries, or collectively resisting abusive conditions (Sijapati & Limbu, 2017; Rahman & Tazrin, 2022). Agency may manifest as everyday resistance rather than overt protest.

Intersectionality further shapes agency. Class, rural origin, marital status, and religion mediate migrant experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Widowed or divorced women, for instance, often face heightened stigma but may also experience greater independence post-migration (Amin & Suran, 2020). Thus, migrant women's identities are layered and dynamic.

7.4 Identity, Respectability, and Social Status

In Bangladeshi society, female migration historically carried moral suspicion. Women working abroad, particularly in domestic service, were sometimes associated with sexual impropriety (Siddiqui, 2019). However, as female migration has increased, social perceptions have gradually shifted.

Remittances play a critical role in reshaping social status. Households receiving female-generated remittances often experience improved housing, education access, and consumption patterns, which can reframe migration as respectable (Raihan & Raihan, 2022). Over time, migrant women may gain symbolic capital within their communities.

Yet respectability remains fragile. Returnee women sometimes encounter stigma, especially if rumours of employer abuse circulate. Reintegration programs in Bangladesh are still limited, and psychosocial support is insufficient (IOM, 2021). Identity reconstruction upon return thus becomes a contested process.

7.5 Digital Agency and Collective Mobilisation

Recent scholarship highlights the role of digital technologies in enhancing migrant women's collective voice (Leurs & Smets, 2018). Bangladeshi domestic workers abroad increasingly use online platforms to share experiences, seek advice, and mobilise support.

Transnational advocacy networks, including NGOs in Dhaka and migrant associations in the Gulf, have amplified cases of abuse and pressured governments for policy reforms (ILO, 2022). These digital solidarities demonstrate how migrant women engage in political agency beyond workplace negotiation.

However, digital access is uneven, and surveillance risks persist. Employers may restrict phone usage, and online activism can expose workers to retaliation. Thus, digital agency remains mediated by structural power relations.

7.6 Theoretical Implications

From a feminist sociological perspective, migrant women's agency must be theorised within relational power geometries (Massey, 1994). Women navigate overlapping structures-patriarchy, capitalism, state regulation-while constructing identities that are simultaneously local and transnational.

Agency is therefore:

- Relational (shaped by family and employer relations)
- Contextual (conditioned by migration regimes)
- Transformative (capable of reshaping gender norms incrementally)

Bangladesh's experience illustrates how migration can destabilise rigid gender roles, even as new forms of precarity emerge.

8. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This feminist sociological review of gendered migration, with a comparative South Asian focus anchored in Bangladesh, demonstrates that migration is neither purely emancipatory nor wholly exploitative. Rather, it is a deeply gendered social process structured by global capitalism, patriarchal norms, labour market segmentation, and restrictive citizenship regimes.

The analysis reveals several key insights. First, global care chains expose the transnational redistribution of reproductive labour, where Bangladeshi and South Asian women subsidise wealthier economies through undervalued care work. Second, labour market segmentation confines migrant women to precarious, informalized

sectors, reinforcing gendered inequalities across borders. Third, legal precarity-especially under sponsorship systems- produces layered vulnerabilities that intersect with gender, class, and nationality. Finally, migrant women's agency complicates simplistic victim narratives; women strategically negotiate constraints, reshape household power relations, and construct transnational identities.

However, the agency does not eliminate structural injustice. Persistent wage gaps, abuse risks, limited legal protection, and social stigma demand comprehensive policy reform.

Policy Implications

- **Strengthening Bilateral Labour Agreements**: Bangladesh and receiving countries must revise labour agreements to ensure enforceable protections for domestic workers, including minimum wage standards, rest days, and grievance mechanisms (ILO, 2022).
- **Reforming Recruitment Practices**: Reducing recruitment fees and regulating intermediaries can minimise debt bondage and trafficking risks (IOM, 2021).
- **Legal Protection and Inclusion**: Receiving countries should integrate domestic workers into national labour laws, abolish restrictive sponsorship systems, and guarantee freedom of movement.
- **Pre-Departure and Reintegration Support**: Bangladesh should expand gender-sensitive training, financial literacy programs, and psychosocial services for returnees.
- **Regional Cooperation**: South Asian states can collaborate on migrant protection frameworks, sharing best practices and harmonising standards.
- **Recognition of Care Work**: At a structural level, care work must be recognised as essential labour within global economic systems. Feminist policy approaches should redistribute care responsibilities more equitably across genders and states.

In conclusion, gendered migration from Bangladesh and South Asia reveals the entanglement of agency and structure within global inequalities. A feminist sociological lens not only exposes systemic injustices but also highlights migrant women's resilience and transformative potential. Future research should deepen intersectional analysis and examine long-term socio-cultural changes resulting from female migration.

References

Adhikari, J., & Estes, S. (2023). Remittances, gender, and family transformation in Nepalese migrant households. *Migration and Development Review, 12*(3), 215–237.

Adhikari, J., Thapa, S., & Gautam, P. (2024). Legal precarity and migrant care workers in the Middle East: A Nepalese perspective. *Asian Journal of*

Migration Studies, 16(1), 78–98.

Begum, S., & Rahman, S. (2021). Female migrant domestic workers from Bangladesh: Agency, vulnerability, and returnee experiences. *Journal of South Asian Women Studies, 9*(2), 45–67.

Bhattacharya, T. (2017). *Social reproduction theory*. Pluto Press.

Benería, L., & Roldán, M. (1987). *The crossroads of class and gender*. University of Chicago Press.

BMET. (2023). *Bangladesh migration statistics: Female labour migration trends*. Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Desai, R., & Banerjee, P. (2020). Nurses, care work, and migration in India. *International Review of Sociology, 30*(4), 563–580.

Dixon-Woods, M., et al. (2006). How can systematic reviews incorporate qualitative research? *Qualitative Research, 6*(1), 27–44.

Finfgeld-Connett, D. (2014). Literature synthesis: A qualitative systematic review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 70*(4), 518–532.

Gartaula, H., et al. (2021). Gender, migration, and rural transformation in Nepal. *Population, Space and Place, 27*(7), e2478.

Farhana, K. M., & Mannan, K. A. (2023). *Motivational factors of migration from Bangladesh to Italy*. Routledge Handbook of South Asian Migrations, Edited by Ajaya K. Sahoo, Routledge, 1st Edition, 195-207. eBook ISBN9781003327363, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003327363

Hall, D., & Ryan, C. B. (2018). Migration, gender and the global care economy. *Sociology Compass, 12*(3), e12573.

Hochschild, A. (2000). Global care chains. In W. Hutton & A. Giddens (Eds.), *Global transformations reader* (pp. 274–288). Routledge.

Human Rights Watch. (2022). *"Pay us our wages": Exploitation of migrant workers in the Middle East*. HRW Report.

Huda, S. (2014). *Women's migration from Bangladesh: Patterns and implications*. Routledge.

ILO. (2020). *Care work and care jobs: For the future of decent work*. Geneva: ILO.

ILO. (2023). *Global estimates on migrant care workers*. Geneva: ILO.

Jayawardena, K., & Munasinghe, M. (2020). Female migration and care work in Sri Lanka. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, 29*(1), 23–45.

Karn, V., & Koka, A. (2023). Caste, gender, and migration in India's care sector. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 46*(2), 334–352.

Khatun, F., & Roy, T. (2021). Gendered labour migration from Bangladesh: State policies and migrant experiences. *Journal of Migration Policy Studies, 13*(1), 104–126.

Khan, A., Sultana, J., & Rahman, M. (2022). Migrant women's labour rights and social protection in South Asia. *Development and Society, 51*(1), 89–110.

Khan, N., Alam, M., & Hassan, S. (2023). Legal exclusion and migrant domestic workers: A South Asian comparative analysis. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 24*(5), 1287–1305.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Maharjan, A. (2016). Female migration in Nepal: Causes and consequences. *South Asian Journal of Migration Studies, 4*(1), 31–49.

Mays, N., Pope, C., & Popay, J. (2005). Systematically reviewing qualitative and quantitative evidence. *Health Technology Assessment, 9*(1), 1–274.

Muslim, N., Roy, S., & Dutta, P. (2021). Indian caregivers abroad: Negotiating precarity and mobility. *Global Networks, 21*(4), 659–677.

Parreñas, R. (2001). *Servants of globalisation*. Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. (2015). Gender and care in migration. *Annual Review of Sociology, 41*, 407–426.

Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences*. Blackwell.

Piper, N. (2020). Gendered migration regimes in South Asia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 83*, 102356.

Piper, N., & Lohmann, L. (2023). Migrant worker organisations and advocacy in Asia. *Migration Studies Journal, 11*(2), 222–243.

Rahman, M. (2020). Women, migration and family restructuring in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Social Science, 48*(3), 395–415.

Rashid, F., & Siddiqua, S. (2022). Remittances and caregiving in Bangladeshi transnational families. *Journal of South Asian Development, 17*(4), 346–363.

Samaddar, R. (2021). Indian domestic workers in the global care economy. *Journal of*

Contemporary Asia, 51(5), 702–719.

Shah, S. (2022). Pakistani women's migration: Marriage, family and labour markets. *Journal of Gender Studies, 31*(6), 735–749.

Siddiqua, S., & Rashid, F. (2021). Female domestic workers from Bangladesh in the Gulf states: Experiences and aspirations. *Migration Studies Quarterly, 9*(2), 112–130.

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339.

Sultana, J. (2020). Feminist migration studies in South Asia. *Sociological Horizons, 15*(1), 1–24.

Sultana, J. (2021). Epistemic reflexivity in migration research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 27*(9), 1182–1195.

Sultana, J., & Ahmed, N. (2023). Domestic worker associations and migrant empowerment in Bangladesh. *Journal of Migration and Society, 11*(1), 44–66.

Sultana, J., & Rahman, S. (2021). Rural precarity and female labour migration. *South Asia Journal of Sociology, 19*(2), 217–234.

Thapa, S., & Sæther, E. (2020). Nepali care migrants' well-being in the Gulf. *Journal of Migration Health, 3*, 100041.

Tronto, J. (2013). *Caring democracy*. University of Minnesota Press.

UN Women. (2023). *Women migrant workers and care economies*. UN Women Report.

Vertovec, S. (2007). *New complexities of migration*. Routledge.

Wickramasinghe, D., & Fernando, H. (2024). Migrant care workers and civil society advocacy in Sri Lanka. *Asian Migration Review, 2*(1), 55–78.

Yeates, N. (2009). *Global care chains*. Routledge.