
MIGRATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN NAGALAND: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WOMEN MIGRANTS IN DIMAPUR'S UNORGANISED SECTOR

T. Limanochet Jamir, City Law College, Dimapur

ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex dynamics of migration in Nagaland, focusing on the distinct yet often intersecting experiences of Naga or local internal migrant women and external migrant women from outside the state. The research specifically looks at women in Dimapur's unorganised sector, where many are employed as domestic workers and daily wage labourers. Using a qualitative, feminist research methodology, this paper explores the reasons for women's migration, the various vulnerabilities they face, and their diverse coping mechanisms.

The findings highlight significant disparities in livelihood opportunities, working conditions, and access to support structures. The study reveals particularly subtle exploitation for both groups, including the problematic "(like a) family member" designation for some Naga domestic workers. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, gender-sensitive policy interventions and strong support frameworks to address these intricate challenges.

Keywords: Migration, Women, Dimapur, Unorganised Sector, Domestic Workers, Qualitative Research, Vulnerabilities.

1. Introduction: The Evolving Landscape of Migration in Nagaland

Human migration is an enduring feature of civilisation that profoundly transforms societies and economies. In the 21st century, rapid rural-to-urban shifts have made both internal and international migration paramount development and policy imperatives. Unlike historical migrations driven by the pursuit of new fertile lands, contemporary movements often involve integration into existing societies with established cultures, raising complex questions of loyalty, identity, development, and security.

Nagaland, characterised by its predominantly mountainous landscape that gradually descends into the plains bordering Assam and the hilly regions adjacent to Myanmar, experiences significant migratory flows. Within its low-lying, urbanising areas, particularly Dimapur, migration is inextricably linked to socio-economic development. For this study, migrants in Nagaland are broadly categorised into two principal groups:

- i. **Internal women migrants:** These are primarily Naga women from within Nagaland, typically from remote villages, who relocate to urban centres like Dimapur. Their motivations generally include seeking better livelihoods, improved educational opportunities, or other personal and familial advancements. Recent data from the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21) indicates that "studies" are the single largest reason for internal migration within Nagaland (23.7%), followed by marriage (20.9%) and employment-related factors (11.6%). This reflects a shift from a purely economic paradigm to a more nuanced view of migration drivers.
- ii. **External women migrants:** This category includes individuals from outside the state, driven by similar aspirations. It prominently includes suspected undocumented migrant women, whose sizable presence warrants specific attention. While other groups such as Assamese, Bengalis, etc., also fall under this category, their current impact and associated challenges are comparatively less pronounced.

Undocumented migration into Nagaland, particularly along the Assam border and within Dimapur city, has been ongoing since the early 1970s, accelerating from the 1980s onwards.¹

¹ Singh, Dr. M. A. (2009). *Illegal immigration into North East India: The Case of Nagaland*. Occasional Paper No. 8. Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). Retrieved from

While precise demographic data for the total undocumented immigrant population in Nagaland remains elusive, older estimates from NGO sources in 1999 suggested approximately 2,00,000 Bangladeshi individuals in the Dimapur area alone.² By 2003, the Nagaland government estimated about 1,00,000 illegal immigrants settled in the state's foothills bordering Assam.³ This concentration extends beyond Nagaland, with significant Bangladeshi migrant populations in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura. Recent news reports from Nagaland's Department of Information & Public Relations confirm that the state government continues to prioritise efforts to curb illegal immigration, underscoring this as a persistent policy issue.

Adopting a gender perspective is crucial for understanding the intricate dynamics of migration and for informing the design and implementation of humanitarian assistance.⁴ Migratory contexts frequently compel women to assume expanded and diversified roles as primary caregivers and economic providers for their families. A gender-sensitive approach ensures that women's practical needs, often overlooked, become visible, and their agency in improving their social position is supported. Immigrant women face compounded vulnerabilities due to existing gender hierarchies, which significantly influence their access to employment, working conditions, and wage equity compared to their male counterparts. This study aims to separate the experiences of different groups of migrant women to offer a more nuanced understanding of their specific challenges and resilience, thereby contributing to more informed policy development.

2. Contextualising Differences: Internal and External Women Migrants in Dimapur's Unorganised Sector

Nagaland is a culturally rich state, home to approximately 16 major tribes, each with unique dialects and cultural practices, dispersed across its 17 districts. Despite ongoing governmental efforts aimed at regional upliftment, most districts frequently contend with developmental disparities. This often compels Nagas from remote areas to seek opportunities in more developed urban centres, particularly Dimapur, where they navigate diverse social and

http://www.idsa.in/system/files/OccasionalPaper8_NagalandIllegalImmigration.pdf

² Jeermison, R. K. (09-11-2011). Politics of Population Growth in Nagaland. *e-pao.net*. Retrieved from http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Census_of_Manipur.Politics_of_Population_Growth_in_Nagaland

³ Rio to warn Delhi on settlers with expose. (26-12-2003). *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031226/asp/northeast/story_2719485.asp

⁴ Bushra, J. E. (2001). Gender and displacement. *Forced Migration Review*, 9, 2-3. Retrieved from <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR09/fmr9.2.pdf>

economic landscapes.

Migrant populations from outside the state in Nagaland are primarily stratified into two categories: documented migrants (typically Indian citizens from neighbouring Indian states like Assam, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar) and undocumented migrants (suspected immigrants from Bangladesh). The latter group often enters this hilly state in pursuit of livelihoods, subsequently establishing long-term settlements and progressively integrating into various business sectors. In Dimapur, these undocumented migrants exert considerable control over trades involving second-hand clothing and grocery stores and are significantly engaged in manual construction labour and daily wage sectors.

Despite Nagaland lacking direct land or water connectivity with Bangladesh, suspected undocumented immigrants predominantly enter via Assam. It is suspected that they frequently obtain fraudulent identity documents from districts such as Karimganj, Nagaon, Golaghat, and Sibsagar in Assam, subsequently settling in the Assam-Nagaland border foothills and surrounding Dimapur. The possession of such documents often complicates efforts by local law enforcement to verify their nationality. Furthermore, Dimapur's cosmopolitan character, as Nagaland's commercial nucleus, renders the identification and detection of these migrants particularly challenging. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some migrants have even engaged in intermarriage with local women, ostensibly to gain local patronage and facilitate integration.

3. Methodology

This study employed a comparative case study design, allowing for an in-depth examination of the distinct experiences of indigenous Naga migrants and suspected undocumented immigrants. This approach was chosen to illuminate the impact of differing historical backgrounds, geographical origins, and socio-economic statuses on their migratory journeys. The research adopted a qualitative, feminist methodological framework, placing particular emphasis on understanding migration from the female gender perspective.

3.1. Theoretical Underpinnings: Feminist Research and Action-Research

The research was fundamentally informed by feminist theories of migration, which posit that migration is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. Instead, it is deeply shaped by, and in turn shapes, existing gender relations, power dynamics, and patriarchal structures both at the origin

and destination. A central theoretical assumption guiding this study was that women today are migrating not only out of economic necessity but also in pursuit of identity, survival, and transformative change. Within prevailing socio-economic and cultural contexts, women often rely on kin- or village-based networks to facilitate their movement.⁵ This process, however, exposes them to a continuum of vulnerabilities, including abuse, exploitation, and deceit, which are often overlooked by conventional research frameworks that focus solely on the workplace. Consequently, a rights and vulnerabilities approach was deemed essential to comprehensively understand and address these multi-layered violations.

Furthermore, this study integrated principles of action-research, a hallmark of feminist methodologies. In this paradigm, research is not merely an observational exercise but an active tool for social change, aiming to empower the research "subjects" (in this case, migrant women) by enabling them to gain greater control over their lives. This approach recognises the coconstruction of knowledge and emphasizes the researcher's role in facilitating collective processes based on shared experiences. The researcher engagement moved beyond a traditional interviewer-interviewee dynamic, with active intervention at various stages in the lives of the women in my sample. This included offering support in instances of domestic disputes, providing information on health resources, and advocating for their rights, such as assisting in the recovery of unpaid wages. Such interventions were crucial for building trust and establishing rapport, foundational elements for meaningful qualitative inquiry.

3.2. Data Collection and Participant Selection

The study was conducted intensively over a short period of time in Dimapur city of Nagaland. Participants included a selected number of migrant women from both Naga communities and suspected undocumented migrant backgrounds. Given the sensitive nature of undocumented status, the precise number of participants cannot be disclosed to ensure anonymity, but efforts were made to achieve saturation of themes within the given timeframe.

Data collection primarily involved:

- i. **Informal, in-depth interviews:** These were largely unstructured, allowing women to

⁵ Jagori. (2007). *Rights & Vulnerabilities: A Research Study of Migrant Women Workers in the Informal Sector in Delhi*. Jagori. Retrieved from <http://jagori.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/07/migration-final-report.pdf>

narrate their experiences in their own words, guided by broad thematic questions.

- ii. **Group discussions:** These facilitated the collective sharing of experiences, identifying common challenges and coping strategies.
- iii. **Personal testimonies:** Documenting individual narratives provided rich, subjective insights into their migratory journeys.
- iv. **Direct observation:** The researcher spent time in identified work sites and dwelling places, particularly where suspected undocumented migrant women lived or worked, to observe their daily lives and working conditions.

Identifying suspected undocumented migrants posed a significant challenge, as most were reluctant to reveal their true identity due to fear of repercussions. This necessitated a flexible and empathetic approach, relying on community networks where trust had been established. For Naga women, access was comparatively easier through organisations and informal networks.

4. Case Study: Comparative Analysis of Migrant Experiences

The qualitative insights from Dimapur revealed stark contrasts and some commonalities in the lived experiences of Naga and suspected undocumented migrant women. While the overarching driver for many women was the search for a livelihood, nuances emerged based on their migrant status and social capital.

4.1. Drivers of Migration and Livelihood Opportunities

For Naga women, livelihood was paramount, yet as the latest NSSO data confirms, other factors such as pursuing higher education and seeking a change in living standards also motivated their migration. Many migrated with their families, but women often gradually became primary breadwinners, adapting to urban economic demands. For example, one interviewee from a rural village noted, "In my village, there was nothing for me. Coming here, even if I work in someone's home, I can send money back and ensure my children go to school."

The broader context of globalisation and rural agrarian decline has been crucial. The loss of traditional small-scale industries and the shrinking of local economic units in rural Nagaland

have compelled many to leave their villages for urban centres. Cities, simultaneously, have witnessed a rise in demand for domestic care work, driven by increased education and workforce participation among urban women, coupled with the middle class's growing buying capacity. This creates a specific "pull factor" for Naga women, as they are often sought after for housework and childcare, filling a gendered labour gap. This dynamic is particularly pronounced when compared with certain Naga tribes to the general Nagas tribes, where domestic work might carry different social connotations.

Suspected undocumented migrant women, conversely, migrated primarily out of sheer economic desperation. Their movement is often less about 'choice' and more about 'survival'. They typically fill labour demands in sectors considered low skill, physically demanding, and often hazardous.

4.2. Work Sector and Conditions: A Tale of Two Realities

The study found that the largest percentage of interviewed Naga women were employed as domestic workers. This preference is understandable given the low-skill nature of the job and the perception that it aligns with traditionally female household tasks. Unfortunately, many young Naga women are brought to Dimapur to engage in domestic work, often with meagre wage and sometimes in exchange for schooling or vocational training, with little to no formal wage. This illustrates a vulnerability rooted in social structures and trust.

In contrast, a considerable number of suspected undocumented migrant women were engaged in small-scale factories, construction sites, and other segments of the unorganised sector. Their work is characterised by the absence of written contracts, minimum wage standards, or formal redressal mechanisms. Working conditions are often deplorable, with the only recourse for violations being to abandon the job. For instance, a migrant woman working at a brick kiln described, "We work from dawn to dusk. There is no fixed pay, only what the contractor decides. If we speak up, there are ten others waiting to take our place."

The informal nature of these sectors, particularly for suspected undocumented migrants, makes them highly susceptible to exploitation. Employers and those in positions of power capitalise on the workers' desperate need for income, leading to various forms of abuse, including theft accusations, non-payment of wages, bribery, and physical and sexual harassment.

4.3. Economic and Social Vulnerabilities

Suspected undocumented migrant women, particularly those residing in slums, often experience extreme financial precarity, living a hand-to-mouth existence. Debt is a significant pressure, pushing them into casualised labour with no employment security or benefits. They are acutely aware of their dispensability in the labour market. As one woman shared, "We know we cannot demand more. If we lose this job, our children will starve. They will find someone else immediately."

In stark contrast, internal migrant Naga women in Dimapur generally enjoy a comparatively better socio-economic status. While still vulnerable, their shared tribal identity and the presence of their tribal organisations and informal community networks often provide a cushion not available to suspected undocumented migrants.

4.4. Violence and Harassment: A Deep Dive

Many respondents, across both groups, reported experiencing various forms of violence—in the home, workplace, and public spaces. Domestic violence was widespread among interviewed women, who often spoke candidly about it. For many, it was perceived as an unfortunate, yet normalised, part of everyday life. While women demonstrated resilience and resistance, combating it in various ways, the expectation of such violence from a husband was a common sentiment.

However, discussing sexual harassment in public or at the workplace elicited significant hesitation. Many denied any personal experience or knowledge of it, or worse, subscribed to a narrative that suggested harassment only occurred if a woman "invited it". These responses are deeply embedded in patriarchal notions of shame and honour. Admitting to harassment was often perceived as a reflection on their own conduct or "character", rather than an indictment of the perpetrator. This internalised victim-blaming highlights a profound barrier to reporting and seeking justice.

4.5. Health and Gender Relations

Access to healthcare, particularly specialised treatment and sexual and reproductive health services, proved significantly challenging for undocumented migrant women, leaving many in precarious positions. This challenge was largely due to their undocumented status, fear of

exposure, and economic constraints. Naga migrant women, by virtue of their citizenship and community networks, generally experienced easier access to healthcare facilities.

The impact of migration on gender relations is complex and varied. Existing literature suggests that women often assume a greater number of roles and responsibilities post-migration,⁶ leading to a reconstitution of patriarchy.⁷ However, these effects are "highly uneven and shifting in quality, often resulting in gains for women in certain spheres and losses in others."⁸ For single Naga migrants, the impact on gender relations within a household context was minimal. However, for external migrants who largely migrated as families, the experiences were more varied. Some reported greater agency and decision-making power due to their economic contributions, while others faced exacerbated domestic violence because of heightened stress and changed power dynamics within the household.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This study reveals that while both suspected undocumented immigrant women and Naga migrant women experience gendered vulnerabilities, their specific challenges and coping mechanisms diverge significantly due to their distinct legal statuses, social capital, and community integration.

Suspected undocumented migrant women, often concealing their true identity out of fear, face severe abuse, exploitation, and human rights violations within the unorganised sector. Their precarious legal status leaves them with virtually no bargaining power and no formal avenues for redressal. Unlike some Naga domestic workers, they are often compelled to be vocal about their meagre wages and deplorable working conditions, simply out of sheer necessity.

Conversely, while internal migrant Naga women also face vulnerabilities, particularly in domestic work, they often display a reluctance to openly identify as domestic workers. This may stem partly from a perceived unfavourable attitude towards domestic work within the broader Naga community that might associate such labour with lower social status which might contribute to their hesitancy in openly discussing their work, seeking formal contracts, or

⁶ Bushra, J. E., *supra note 4*.

⁷ Grieco, E. M., & Boyd, M. (2004, August). Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory. *Migration Information Source*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=106>

⁸ Kibria, N. (1990). Power, Patriarchy, and Gender conflict in the Vietnamese Immigrant community. *Gender and Society*, 4(1), 9-24. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004001002>

asserting their rights. Despite this, Naga migrant women generally enjoy a significantly better living standard in Dimapur compared to their suspected undocumented counterparts, likely due to a more lenient social attitude towards fellow Nagas.

A particularly insidious form of exploitation identified is the practice by some general Naga employers of labelling Naga domestic workers as "family members." While seemingly benign, this informal designation effectively nullifies an employer-employee relationship, thereby denying these workers formal contracts, standard wages, benefits, and any legal recourse. This practice renders them highly vulnerable to abuse, often behind closed doors. This finding resonates with independent investigation reports highlighting that "minor girls" and "domestic helpers" are disproportionately victims of crime in Nagaland.⁹ The true scale of crimes against women in Nagaland, particularly domestic workers, remains largely undocumented by official channels, urging critical introspection from women's organisations. The findings underscore that migration in Nagaland is not a monolithic phenomenon. The intersection of gender, legal status, and ethnic identity creates differential vulnerabilities and opportunities, necessitating tailored interventions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

6. Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

Based on the nuanced findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forth to address the complex issues surrounding migration and enhance the well-being of migrant women in Nagaland:

- i. Comprehensive Policy on Domestic Work:** Formulate a clear, legally binding policy that defines the roles and rights of "domestic workers." This policy must incorporate a strong gendered approach, acknowledging the specific vulnerabilities faced by women in this sector. Mandate written contracts for all domestic workers, specifying wages, working hours, leave, and a grievance redressal mechanism.
- ii. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Political Will:** Foster robust political will from the state government to acknowledge and address migration as a significant policy issue. Encourage active participation from NGOs, community leaders, and religious institutions (e.g., churches) in advocating for migrant rights and welfare. Their

⁹ Chishi, Y. M. (16-10-2013). Crime against women behind closed doors. *The Morung Express*.

grassroots reach is invaluable.

- iii. Economic Empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Promote the formation and strengthening of SHGs specifically for migrant women. These groups can provide platforms for financial literacy, collective savings, and access to microcredit, enabling women to explore alternative income-generating activities and escape exploitative labour. Foster peer support networks within SHGs to address mental health and social integration challenges.
- iv. Ensuring Right to Healthcare:** Strongly advocate for and ensure universal access to healthcare services for all migrant women, irrespective of their documented status. This includes comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, maternal and child health services, and mental health support. Special provisions might be needed for remote areas or for women hesitant to access formal healthcare.
- v. Educational and Skill Development Avenues:** Given that studies are a top driver for migration in Nagaland, create avenues for subsidies for migrant women to access formal education and vocational training programmes. Implement special educational programmes addressing literacy, numeracy, and life skills, tailored to the specific needs and schedules of migrant women, including those in informal sectors.
- vi. Information Dissemination and Awareness Campaigns:** Launch robust government-led media campaigns (e.g., radio, local newspapers, community meetings) to disseminate accurate information to prospective migrants at origin points about the realities, risks, and available support structures at the destination. Conduct awareness campaigns in destination areas (e.g., Dimapur) among employers and the public regarding the rights of domestic workers and the illegality of exploitation.
- vii. Financial Management and Remittance Diversification:** Develop programmes and interventions to help female migrants effectively manage their remittances, encouraging investment in productive assets or small-scale enterprises rather than solely consumption. Provide financial literacy training and facilitate access to formal banking services and credit for small businesses.
- viii. Evidence-Based and Non-Partisan Policymaking:** Emphasize that policy decisions

regarding migration must be based on rigorous research, data, and humanitarian principles, rather than being swayed by emotional considerations, stereotypes, or shortterm political gains.

ix. Regional Cooperation (Bangladesh-India): While economic development in Bangladesh may influence migration patterns, the role of "social networks" as one of the "pull factor" for Bangladeshi migrants into India suggests that economic interventions alone may be insufficient. A more holistic approach, involving bilateral discussions, border management strategies, and joint development initiatives with Bangladesh, is necessary.