Indigenous women at the crossroads of migration and marginalization

Mujeres indígenas en la encrucijada de migración y marginalización

Mulheres indígenas na intersecção entre migração e marginalização

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Abstract

Indigenous migrant women bear layers of oppression leading to their dispossession and invisibility. Positioned at the intersection of systemic inequality, patriarchal dominance, and gender-based violence, they face compounded marginalization. This article foregrounds the everyday realities of indigenous migrant women across South Asia and Latin America, drawing on case studies and narratives from India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras. Engaging with social contract theory and intersectional feminist frameworks, it questions how indigenous migrant women are often relegated to the peripheries. While mainstream discourses on indigeneity usually emphasize cultural erasure, they lag in addressing the violence and vulnerability of migrant indigenous women. Combining literature review, policy reports, case studies, and narratives documented by earlier ethnographers, this paper focuses on how indigenous migrant women are subjected to racialized sexism, labor exploitation, and cultural alienation. This qualitative methodological approach helps expose the epistemic violence embedded in dominant feminist and migration discourses that exclude indigenous perspectives. As a site of critical resistance, this paper

encourages an understanding of indigenous feminism, which reclaims the voices of indigenous migrant women while challenging both settler-colonial structures and internal patriarchies. It advances feminist discourse that reflects plural epistemologies. In doing so, this article repositions indigenous migrant women as key agents of resistance within the broader struggle for recognition, justice, and self-determination. Through this study, we argue that an inclusive legal framework and culturally sensitive migration policies offer potential solutions.

Keywords: indigenous women; migration; intersectionality; indigenous feminism; marginalization.

Resumen

Las mujeres indígenas migrantes cargan capas de opresión causantes de despojo e invisibilidad. Ubicadas en un intersticio entre la desigualdad, el dominio patriarcal, y la violencia de género, ellas enfrentan una marginalización compleja. Este artículo destaca las realidades cotidianas de mujeres migrantes en el Sur de Asia y en América Latina, particularmente abordando el estudio de casos y narrativas de India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, México y Honduras. A partir de la teoría del contrato social y marcos feministas interseccionales, esta investigación indaga sobre cómo las mujeres indígenas migrantes son relegadas a las periferias. Mientras los discursos canónicos sobre la indigeneidad usualmente destacan la invisibilización cultural, estos dejan de lado la violencia y vulnerabilidad de las mujeres indígenas migrantes. Considerando bibliografía, informes policiales, estudios de caso, y narrativas documentadas por etnógrafos anteriores, esta investigación se centra en cómo las mujeres indígenas migrantes son sometidas a sexismo racial, explotación laboral y alienación cultural. El abordaje con metodología cualitativa permite exponer la violencia epistémica arraigada en discursos dominantes sobre feminismo y migración que excluyen las perspectivas indígenas. Como sitio de resistencia crítica, este artículo alienta el entendimiento del feminismo indígena, el cual reclama las voces de las mujeres indígenas migrantes al mismo tiempo que desafía tanto las estructuras coloniales como los patriarcados internos. Asimismo, promueve el discurso feminista que da cuenta de epistemologías plurales. De este modo, este texto reposiciona a las mujeres indígenas migrantes como agentes de resistencia clave en una lucha más amplia por el reconocimiento, la justicia y la autodeterminación. En esta investigación, argumentamos que un marco legal inclusivo y políticas de migración culturalmente sensible ofrecen soluciones potenciales.

Palabras clave: mujeres indígenas; migración; interseccionalidad; feminismo indígena; marginalización.

Resumo

Mulheres indígenas migrantes enfrentam camadas de opressão que resultam em sua desapropriação e invisibilidade. Situadas na interseção entre desigualdade sistêmica, dominação patriarcal e violência de gênero, elas sofrem camadas sobrepostas de marginalização. Este artigo destaca as realidades cotidianas de mulheres indígenas migrantes no Sul da Ásia e na América Latina, com base em estudos de caso e narrativas provenientes da Índia e de Bangladesh, Guatemala, México e Honduras. A partir do diálogo com a teoria do contrato social e com os referenciais do feminismo interseccional, o artigo examina como as mulheres indígenas migrantes são frequentemente relegadas às periferias. Enquanto os discursos predominantes sobre a questão indígena tendem a enfatizar a erosão cultural, raramente abordam de forma adequada a violência e a vulnerabilidade enfrentadas por essas mulheres em situação de migração. Combinando revisão bibliográfica, relatórios de políticas públicas, estudos de caso e narrativas documentadas por etnógrafos anteriores, o artigo analisa como as mulheres indígenas migrantes são submetidas ao sexismo racializado, à exploração do trabalho e à alienação cultural. Essa abordagem metodológica qualitativa permite evidenciar a violência epistêmica presente nos discursos feministas e migratórios dominantes, que costumam excluir perspectivas indígenas. Como espaço de resistência crítica, o artigo propõe uma compreensão do feminismo indígena que recupera as vozes das mulheres indígenas migrantes, desafiando simultaneamente as estruturas coloniais e os patriarcados internos. Assim, o texto contribui para o avanço de um discurso feminista que reflita epistemologias plurais e reposiciona as mulheres indígenas migrantes como agentes centrais de resistência na luta mais ampla por reconhecimento, justiça e autodeterminação. Ao fim, argumentamos que um marco jurídico inclusivo e políticas migratórias culturalmente sensíveis podem oferecer caminhos promissores de transformação.

Palavras-chave: mulheres indígenas; migração; interseção; feminismo indígena; marginalização.

Introduction

> "Precarious lives are often relegated to the zone of structural invisibility"
>
> (Jiwani, 2015)

From the highlands in South Asia to the borders in Latin America, indigenous women have long lived precarious lives. Their narratives are dominated by intersecting marginalization caused by the consequences of colonialism, gender-based violence, displacement, and systemic inequality. This paper aims to amplify the voices of migrant indigenous women by examining how mainstream research, along with critical discourses, has marginalized their issues and relegated them to the peripheries of scholarly and policy debates. It questions how the modern state, built on an idealized social contract, systematically excludes indigenous migrant women, thus violating its promise of protection and equality.

The concept of indigeneity is widely used, yet it remains difficult to define as no universal consensus exists on its precise meaning (Coates, 2004). While widespread usage of the term "indigenous" highlights nativeness, official international definitions emphasize historical continuity, unique cultural identity, marginalization, self-governance, and self-identification as the markers of indigeneity (Dove, 2006; Ohenjo *et al*., 2006). Several scholars and activists have created an unrealistic and overly simplified idea of what it means to be "authentically indigenous". Rather than acknowledging the complex and evolving nature of indigenous identities, they rely on outdated or overly rigid ideas about indigeneity. This process reinforces a narrow definition of identity that can limit diversity and individuality within indigenous communities (Barcham, 2000). Coates (*op. cit.*) argues that viewing indigeneity solely as political and economic disenfranchisement, along with a lack of sovereignty over land and resources, risks reducing it to a narrative of dispossession, rather than recognizing the resilience, agency, and unique cultural identities of indigenous groups. He poses a key question:

> Who, for example, qualifies as indigenous in Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia? If the hill tribes of India and Southeast Asia are included in the definition, in recognition of their relative powerlessness within contemporary nation-states, does the concept of indigenous invariably relate to weakness and inability to control one's territory, resources, and economic independence? For

many observers, indigenous peoples are invariably mobile, hunter-gatherer societies; are agricultural cultures automatically excluded from inclusion? (p. 9)

This question points out the conceptual fluidity of indigeneity and the danger of defining indigenous identity through the reductive lens of weakness or dependence.

In the case of India, the government does not officially recognize any group as "indigenous" in the way the United Nations defines the term. Instead, it classifies specific historically disadvantaged communities as "scheduled tribes" for administrative purposes, granting them specific constitutional protection and benefits (Bijoy *et al*., 2010). Scheduled tribes in India are generally regarded as indigenous communities; however, there is no official definition that precisely delineates tribal identity or indigeneity. Furthermore, the distinction between caste and tribal identity is frequently conflated, thus leading to conceptual ambiguities. The terms "indigenous" and "scheduled tribe" are not synonymous, as not all indigenous groups are classified under the scheduled tribe designation (Bala & Roy, 2024). These complexities underscore the inherent challenges when accurately defining and describing indigeneity. Given these complexities, scholars and international organizations have increasingly recognized that indigenous communities themselves are best positioned to define their own identity. This perspective is reflected in the following:

> The question of 'Who is indigenous?' is best answered by indigenous communities themselves. As testament to this, 'self-identification' policies for indigenous nations have increasingly become an accepted international legal practice beginning in 1977, when the second general assembly of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) passed a resolution stating that 'only indigenous peoples could define indigenous peoples' (Corntassel, 2003, p. 75).

However, the absence of a universally accepted definition of "indigenous peoples" raises concerns that other ethnic groups may falsely claim indigenous status to gain the legal protection outlined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention and the Draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1989). This issue was highlighted in previous Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) sessions, where indigenous participants noted instances of groups asserting indigenous identity without basis—such as the Afrikaner delegations from South Africa, descendants of

Dutch colonizers— and provoking significant concern among legitimately recognized indigenous groups (*ibid.*).

In this study, the concepts of indigeneity and migration are not treated as fixed categories but as lived and politically charged realities. We understand indigeneity as more than a historical marker, as it embodies ancestral continuity, collective memory, and a shared consciousness rooted in the relationship between community, land, and identity. It also represents an act of resistance and self-definition against structures of colonialism, marginalization, and cultural erasure (Corntassel, *op. cit.*; Coates, *op. cit.*; Dove, *op. cit.*). Likewise, migration is approached not merely as a physical movement across borders but as a social and emotional process shaped by histories of dispossession, poverty, gendered exclusion, and the search for dignity (Bandela, Kolay and Kumar, 2013; Guhathakurta, 2015). Both terms signify evolving conditions rather than a static state. They depict realities in which women navigate displacement and loss. Situating these categories together allows the study to explore how indigenous migrant women inhabit intersecting sites of precarity and agency.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

For this research, a qualitative methodology has been employed, particularly emphasizing a context-sensitive approach. The study draws upon existing literature, case analyses, policy reports, and narratives recorded in earlier ethnographic and scholarly works, which document the lived realities of indigenous migrant women. For a holistic perspective, this research incorporates case studies from India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Mexico, recognizing the varied conditions of indigenous migrant women across different geographic and socio-political contexts. In India, Bandela, Kolay and Kumar (*op. cit.*) examine the structural vulnerabilities of indigenous migrant women, while Guhathakurta (*op. cit.*) explores similar struggles in Bangladesh, and McKanders (2010) highlights the intersectional oppression faced by indigenous Guatemalan women.

Additionally, the study draws on personal testimonies of indigenous women from previous ethnographic works—such as Marina, a Guatemalan indigenous migrant discussed by Mckanders (*ibid.*); Ripa Chakma from Bangladesh's Chakma community, documented by Guhathakurta (*op. cit.*); and Belinda, a Honduran indigenous girl, whose story is presented by Speed (2023). While the case studies focus on the violence experienced by indigenous women as a collective group, the personal testimonies drawn

from previous ethnographic research foreground the individual experiences of some migrant indigenous women. The study primarily focuses on feminist thought, indigenous rights, and migration studies to develop a comprehensive analytical framework.

Latin American scholars have long examined how gender, race, and coloniality shape the experiences of indigenous women. Cabnal (2010) and Segato (2016) offer influential decolonial feminist frameworks that expose how patriarchal and colonial systems reinforce one another in the subordination of indigenous women. In a related vein, Magliano and Ferreccio (2017) expose how Argentina's judicial system reproduces colonial and intersectional blind spots that marginalize indigenous women, revealing the persistence of institutional and epistemic violence. More recently, Soria (2021) shows how indigenous women's activism challenges the limits of mainstream feminism through territorial and decolonial praxis, while reclaiming both space and voice within contemporary feminist discourse. Built on this body of work, the present study situates indigenous migrant women at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and mobility. It mainly examines how this intersectionality shapes their lives, and it also acknowledges that, though similar, the experiences of these women are not homogenous. This approach ascribes individuality to these women. as it does not club them all under the common umbrella of suffering.

This research begins by engaging with social contract theory to examine the foundations of state authority and individual rights. According to social contract theory, individuals give consent, either explicitly or implicitly, to form a society and accept certain moral and political obligations in exchange for protection and the benefits of social living. Hobbes (1996 [1651]) argued that in the state of nature, people live in conflict as everyone enjoys equality, which creates a state of lack of authority. To escape this chaos, they agree to a social contract, giving up their rights to a sovereign who ensures peace and order. Unlike Hobbes, Locke (1988 [1689]) observed that individuals are born with natural unalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. In Locke's contract, sovereignty lies with the people, and rulers' power is limited by natural law. If a government violates people's rights, citizens have the right to revolt. In the eighteenth century, Rousseau (2018 [1762]) proposed a collective contract in which individuals form a unified political community governed by the general will.

According to Pateman (1989, as cited in del Águila, 2014), both Locke and Rousseau excluded women from the social contract. They conceived of liberty and equality as the

birthright of men alone, thus institutionalizing women's subordination. Denied access to the public sphere, women were defined as emotional, irrational, and unfit for full citizenship. As Nussbaum (2006) observes, such subordination stands in direct contradiction to Locke's own assertion of natural equality. By restricting reason and property ownership to men, Locke's social contract effectively renders women politically absent. Similarly, Rousseau, despite idealizing maternal virtue, reinforced women's subordination, praising them as educators of future citizens but denying them citizenship. Feminist critics such as Mary Wollstonecraft have shown that this exclusion was not natural but socially produced (del Águila, *op. cit.*). Thus, the claimed universality of the social contract conceals a foundational gendered inequality. While women were rendered invisible within its framework, indigenous women were doubly erased—excluded from the imagined political community and from the very discourse that professed to guarantee equality and protection for all.

The exclusion built into the early social contract is not limited to a philosophical dimension; it echoes in the lives of women even today. The same ideas that once confined women to the margins of citizenship now shape the global systems that govern mobility, labor, and belonging. For indigenous women, these inherited hierarchies turn migration into another site of inequality. It is in this continuing pattern of exclusion that feminist discussions on migration and indigeneity find their urgency.

Feminist scholars examine the forces that drive migration from economically disadvantaged to wealthier regions, highlighting how these movements are shaped by historical and ongoing imperialism (Chang, 2000; Espiritu, 2014; Lowe, 2015). However, prevailing feminist debates have not sufficiently addressed the migration of indigenous women. The theoretical framework guiding this paper integrates indigenous feminism and intersectionality so as to evaluate the limitations of dominant feminist discourse. While many indigenous women critique mainstream feminism as Eurocentric, indigenous feminism reorients the discourse towards sovereignty, community, and cultural survival alongside gender equality (Ross, 2009). Studying indigenous identity alone is insufficient; instead, examining social hierarchies and disparities within indigenous communities is crucial. Thus, intersectionality serves as a tool to reveal privilege, systemic power relations, and marginalization (Olsen, 2018).

Women, Indigeneity and Feminism Intersection

Indigenous women, as visible symbols of their cultures, often meet stigma, discrimination and even harassment. These women live across the world in diverse conditions, from wealth to poverty, democracy to dictatorship, and within different legal systems. Despite these differences, they often face similar struggles and challenges, shaped by their shared histories and realities. Whether in a restaurant in Oslo, a marketplace in Dhaka, or the streets of Guatemala City, many share the common experience of being ridiculed or mistreated simply for being indigenous women. While the specific challenges may differ across countries and communities, indigenous women in developing nations like Bangladesh and Peru experience the same fundamental gender inequalities as those in countries like Canada and Norway (Roy, 2004). These women meet both gender discrimination and ethnic marginalization at the hands of the dominant populations in their home countries, and become vulnerable. In many cases, poverty adds a third layer of hardship, thus intensifying their struggles. Roy states that:

> Indigenous women are most vulnerable among indigenous peoples, and face double discrimination—on the basis of their gender for being women and for their ethnicity for being indigenous. In some parts of the world, there is triple burden to bear as indigenous women are also poor (*op. cit.*, p. 3).

Violence against women has been historically considered taboo in indigenous governance systems (Anderson, 2000; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2014). These systems were traditionally egalitarian, with women playing key roles in decision-making. Their leadership was central to community welfare, diplomacy, and land stewardship, ensuring balanced gender dynamics. In many indigenous societies, older women held significant leadership roles, influencing decision-making and governance structures:

> In a number of Indigenous societies, it was older women who made decisions that set the direction for all of the people, which they did as clan mothers, through women's councils, and as head women of their own extended families (Anderson, 2010, p. 84).

Colonization disrupted these traditional gender relations, replacing egalitarian systems with patriarchal structures that marginalized indigenous women, legitimized violence against them, and diminished their social and political roles. The growing legal

recognition of indigenous rights today must therefore be examined in the context of how colonization altered these traditional balances of power (Roy, *op. cit.*; Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010; Finfgeld-Connett, 2015; Burnette, 2016). Colonial administrations imposed Western legal codes that excluded women from decision-making. Besides, the ongoing impact of settler colonialism still ensures that indigenous women remain marginalized through systemic land dispossession, economic exclusion, and political invisibility (Wolfe, 2006). Moreton-Robinson (2000) draws attention to the ways indigenous women's lives are shaped by the enduring forces of colonialism and the dominance of whiteness within social and feminist thought. Her argument resonates with Crenshaw's (1989) notion of intersectionality, which exposes how overlapping social identities, particularly race and gender, produce distinct forms of oppression. While conceptually aligned with Crenshaw's framework, Moreton-Robinson (*op. cit.*) reorients the discussion through a decolonial lens, revealing that the marginalization of indigenous women cannot be understood apart from the colonial histories and power structures that continue to shape their position within feminist discourse.

The exclusion of an indigenous feminist perspective from mainstream feminist theory, as noted by Huhndorf and Suzack (*op. cit.*), reflects a broader pattern of marginalization within feminist discourse. Moreton-Robinson (*op. cit.*) critiques this dynamic, arguing that white feminism often reinforces colonial and racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them. This critique aligns with postcolonial feminist critics (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988), who challenge the Eurocentric tendency to homogenize non-Western women's experiences and emphasize the need for a more inclusive and decolonial approach to gender analysis. Similarly, Bidaseca and Vázquez Laba (2011) assert that feminist thought itself has been deeply shaped by colonial modernity, where the "universal subject" of feminism has historically been imagined as white, Western, and urban. They argue that decolonizing feminism requires recovering the *voces bajas*, the "small voices" or the "low voices", of indigenous and peasant women whose knowledge systems have often been dismissed as pre-modern. Their call to generate knowledge emerging from the margins draws parallels to Spivak's (*op. cit.*) critique of epistemic exclusion and with Moreton-Robinson's (*op. cit.*) insistence on recognizing indigenous epistemic sovereignty.

Indigenous feminism, though a relatively new academic field, stems from a long history of activism aimed at addressing gender discrimination, securing justice, and

countering the marginalization of indigenous women (Huhndorf & Suzack, *op. cit.*). It is both an intersectional framework and practice that centers on decolonization, indigenous sovereignty, and the advancement of human rights for indigenous women, their families, and communities. Gearon (2021) describes indigenous feminism as a movement that restores autonomy, agency, and transformative power to indigenous matriarchs —power based on self-respect, equality, and inclusivity across diverse identities and experiences. Hernández Castillo (2010) further argues that indigenous feminism is a movement that reclaims indigenous epistemologies and cosmovisions as spaces of resistance while advocating for gender equality within indigenous communities. He focuses on how indigenous feminism challenges both Western individualism and internal gender hierarchies, as it seeks to restore the complementarity between men and women that has been eroded by colonialism. Indigenous feminism calls for reclaiming cultural roles and critically examining the ways colonization and patriarchy have distorted them. It encourages difficult conversations and challenges long-standing beliefs, including those presented as "traditional", to ensure they reflect indigenous women's agency and sovereignty (Gearon, *op. cit.*).

Case Studies on Indigenous Women and Migration

Migration is often a consequence of social, economic, and political inequalities, with individuals moving in search of better opportunities. It reshapes not only perceptions of physical space but also identity and cultural awareness (Kapoor, 2023). As globalization continues to expand its reach, the blending of native traditions and ways of life with foreign influences has accelerated, thus shaping cultural identities in dynamic and complex ways (Mathew & Pandya, 2022). This acceleration highlights the need to critically examine how globalization and migration reshape the identities of all migrants, including the indigenous migrants. In the past decade, there has been an increasing recognition of the gaps in migration scholarship concerning indigenous issues. Kymlicka (2010) emphasizes the importance of examining the connections between indigenous people and immigrants, particularly in the context of multiculturalism and integration. Examining indigenous migration alongside the mainstream migration narratives offers a fresh perspective on migration history, and helps uncover interactions between indigenous people and immigrants over time. This reveals patterns of displacement, adaptation, and the effects of policies on their experiences (Pellerin, 2019).

Over the past three decades, scholars have increasingly examined the connections between migration and gender roles, with a particular focus on women's experiences. While men often migrate more freely, as their mobility is associated with risk-taking and fulfilling familial responsibilities, women face greater restrictions due to social expectations that require them to remain present and available for caregiving and domestic roles (Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017). Women migrate for a variety of reasons, much like men, but they often face unique challenges shaped by gendered inequalities in economic, social, and political spheres. Indigenous women, in particular, are among the most vulnerable, frequently trapped in extreme poverty and marginalized within politically unstable and geographically isolated regions. The lack of education, infrastructure, and healthcare further restricts their opportunities, making migration one of the few viable options for survival. Their movement is driven by structural inequalities and development patterns, compelling them to seek better livelihoods, access to essential services, and economic security (Bandela *et al*., *op. cit.*)

Case studies from India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Mexico reveal the challenges indigenous women encounter in both internal and cross-border migration. These women often face economic exploitation, workplace discrimination, and the erosion of their cultural identity. While migration can create new economic opportunities, it also intensifies discrimination, exposure to sexual violence, and cultural displacement. In India, Bandela, Kolay and Kumar (*ibid.*) explore these difficulties, highlighting the challenges faced by tribal women who migrate. Guhathakurta (*op. cit.*) examines similar struggles in Bangladesh, focusing on the reasons for migration, coping mechanisms, and the gendered effects of urbanization. McKanders (*op. cit.*) highlights the intersectional oppression of indigenous Guatemalan women in the United States immigration system, showing how their gender, race, and migrant status compound their marginalization. Several scholars highlight the experiences of Oaxacan indigenous women navigating city life in Mexico. The testimonies of several women reveal how the state, which according to Hobbes (1996 [1651]) is the sovereign authority in the social contract, does not fulfil even the most basic duty of protecting its citizens. Their exclusion is systemic rather than incidental; it is a violation of the agreement that ensures justice, security, and dignity.

To study how migration impacts tribal women in India, Bandela, Kolay, and Kumar (*op. cit.*) selected three Adivasi villages from the Lohindiguda Block in the Bastar Region of Chhattisgarh. The women respondents in this case usually migrated internally from

villages of Kumhali, Belar, Takraguda and Chindgoan. The majority of respondents acknowledge the profound vulnerabilities women face during migration, particularly the prevalence of sexual harassment. Bandela, Kolay, and Kumar (*ibid.*) discuss this prevalence of sexual harassment among migrant tribal women, highlighting the various challenges they face during migration:

> Sexual harassment is one of the most common human rights violations during the migration period. The respondents stated that all of them faced sexual harassment. Most of the employers used obscene language and touched private parts with malicious intentions. The respondents expressed that there were unwed mothers during migration. In the absence of attention from parents and guardians, the women migrant laborers used to come into sexual contact with these outsiders, leading to illegal pregnancies, etc. In many cases, the outsiders use these ladies as kept with false promises of marriage and leave them alone while changing places of jobs. In this way, the number of destitute is increasing in the flock. Illegal sex, no doubt, leads to STD/HIV/AIDS, and the rate of prostitution is also expected to go up (p. 5).

This disturbing account exposes how migration, instead of empowering indigenous women, becomes a site of subjugation. Their poverty-driven migration turns their bodies into terrains where economic deprivation and patriarchal exploitation intersect, revealing how mobility for many entails a paradox of survival.

Many separated women cited migration as a means of survival, seeking better opportunities despite the risks involved. Notably, migrating tribal women met greater difficulties in securing marriage prospects, as migration is perceived as a disruptive factor in their social lives. The women in the study shared how they often felt that their basic rights and sense of dignity were stripped away in their new surroundings. They spoke about how life was not just about having food, shelter, and clothing—it was also about being treated with respect and living with dignity. But for those forced into migration due to poverty, this sense of dignity felt like a distant dream, i.e. something they struggled for in an unfamiliar and often unwelcoming environment.

Guhathakurta's (*op. cit.*) study examines the migration experiences of indigenous women in Bangladesh, focusing on two communities: Chakma women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Garo (Mandi) women from Madhupur forest. While Chakma women migrate to Dhaka for jobs in the garment industries, Garo women find work in the informal sector, such as beauty parlors. Based on empirical evidence,

Guhathakurta asserts that many indigenous women migrated due to poverty, limited job opportunities in rural areas, and political instability, particularly in the CHT, where land grabbing and displacement had worsened their economic conditions. Environmental changes and state policies that restricted access to natural resources, such as forests and water bodies, also forced these communities to seek work in cities. Some women expressed a desire for independence and economic empowerment, seeing migration as a pathway to new opportunities. In urban jobs, indigenous women faced widespread discrimination and exploitation. In the garment sector, many reported harassment by employers and co-workers. In beauty parlors, young, unmarried indigenous women were particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sometimes being forced into prostitution under the guise of home-based work. Harassment outside the workplace was also common, including verbal abuse, physical threats, and racial discrimination due to their distinct appearance, clothing, and cultural background. Adivasi workers faced widespread discrimination from both co-workers and immediate supervisors. High prejudice was evident in derogatory name-calling, mockery of their traditional food habits, and even active resistance to their hiring and inclusion in the workplace. Guhathakurta thus writes:

> Of the respondents in the garments sector, 47.5 percent of them admitted to being harassed outside the workplace; 0.5 percent admitted to seeking legal redress, while 17 percent did not answer. In beauty parlours, 26 percent admitted to being harassed outside the workplace; 3 percent admitted to taking legal redress. In beauty parlours, many mentioned the victimisation and sexual exploitation of unmarried girls of indigenous groups. ... Sexual harassment, as another expression of the racial discrimination, was reported outside the workplace. … Although other women also felt these abuses, they were separately targeted, as Adivasi women were often distinguished through their dress and racial features and cultural habits, and were thus the subject of derogatory forms of address (*ibid.,* pp. 154–155).

In her article, McKanders (*op. cit.*) studies the intersectional oppression faced by indigenous Guatemalan women within the United States immigration system. She identifies a double discrimination as a result of their status as women and as migrants. However, when viewed through the broader lens of intersectionality, a third layer of oppression arising due to indigeneity must also be acknowledged. For these women, indigeneity exacerbates both gendered and migratory vulnerabilities. These women are marginalized within the immigration system and treated as outsiders or "others". This

exclusion makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as they often lack legal protection. McKanders explains:

> The treatment of indigenous women working in the meat processing plants indicates that women's work may also be subjected to double discrimination as a result of their dual status as women and migrants. The women's invisible status within the workforce also compounds women's fears. (p. 8)

McKanders further states that many indigenous women seek asylum in the United States to escape domestic violence. However, their journey exposes them to more violence. Once in the United States, they face discrimination, low wages and unsafe working conditions because the system does not acknowledge how gender, race, and immigration status combine to make them more vulnerable.

Indigenous Zapotec women, who are from the town of Santa Ana Zegache, in Mexico, show an important gendered pattern of their migration. These women started showing an acceleration in their migratory trends from the 1950s (González Montes, 1994; Velasco Ortiz, 2004). However, migratory patterns reveal that most Zapotec women migrate internally, often to Mexico City, while men tend to migrate internationally, primarily to the United States. This restricted mobility of women is designed to limit their autonomy, keeping them close to home to fulfill traditional caregiving roles (Sandoval-Cervantes, *op. cit.*). Women's migration is often influenced by male family members, as they typically follow in the footsteps of fathers or husbands who have already relocated (Hirsch, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007).

Despite their geographical diversity, the cases from India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Mexico reveal converging patterns where indigenous women's migration, whether internal or transnational, exposes them to overlapping vulnerabilities. Across varied socio-political contexts, the underlying condition of economic dispossession remains strikingly consistent. Together, these cases show that indigenous women's vulnerability stems from, rather than chance or circumstance, enduring structural inequalities shaped by global structures that consistently fail to uphold their rights and dignity.

Stories of vulnerable women

Storytelling and the documentation of real-life narratives are fundamental ways of preserving history and expressing personal or collective struggles. In indigenous

traditions, storytelling serves as an important tool of resistance and a way to disrupt dominant colonial narratives (Smith, 1999). This section of the research paper presents accounts of migrant indigenous women documented in scholarly research, providing a deeper and holistic understanding of their realities. These accounts share the experience of women from around the world, including Guatemala, Bangladesh, and Honduras. A common thread weaving through their stories is the vulnerability they face as indigenous migrant women.

While theory and statistical data are essential tools in documenting the narratives of indigenous women, they fail to humanize this field of study. Based on King's (2003) argument that stories shape our understanding of the world, this section explores the experiences of three migrant indigenous women. By foregrounding their narratives, we aim to present a more humane, empathetic, and authentic perspective on the complex realities of indigenous women's migration, highlighting the challenges that these women face. By centering indigenous stories, we move beyond an abstract analysis and engage with the lived experiences of those directly affected, ensuring that research does not just inform but also honors the communities it represents.

McKanders (*op. cit.*) sheds light on the struggles faced by indigenous migrant women, especially those from Latin America, as they navigate a world that often fails to see them. She draws on the story of Marina, an indigenous Guatemalan woman of Mam Mayan descent, who migrated in search of a safer and more stable future. Marina's journey demonstrates the layered challenges migrant indigenous women face in both their home and host countries. As McKanders describes:

> The story of Marina, a Guatemalan worker at the Pilgrim's Pride poultry plant, illustrates how race, education level, gender, and class intersect to directly impact social constructs of a woman of color's experiences, both in Guatemala and after immigrating to the United States (p. 14).

Marina fled the violence and trauma in Guatemala, where she was repeatedly raped and dehumanized by her in-laws. Seeking a better life, she migrated to Florida, but along the way, she endured yet another horrific violation: she was raped again. After a few years, she relocated to Tennessee to work at Pilgrim's Pride, a chicken processing plant placed in Chattanooga. The plant was a breeding ground for injustice and discrimination, as hierarchy depended upon the nationality of the workers. As noted, "Mexicans were

often in supervisory positions, where indigenous Guatemalans often held the lower-level line-worker positions" (*ibid.,* p. 15).

This further exposes the vulnerability of indigenous women who dare to migrate but remain shackled by social discrimination. Marina was detained at the plant in one of the raids conducted by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Pregnant and holding the responsibility of four children, she was released from custody but with an ankle monitor and was later placed into deportation proceedings. Marina's story shows how intersectionality shapes the challenges faced by indigenous migrant women. Her experiences in Guatemala and the United States show how the social contract fails in both countries. In both situations, the state asserts its power over people while denying them the rights and protections that support that power, leaving women like Marina in a state of desolation. These women have limited access to education and lack financial security or knowledge of their legal rights. This deprivation adds another layer to their vulnerability. Due to systemic barriers, these women become victims of violence in both their home countries as well as the host countries.

Another similar story of an indigenous migrant woman was documented by Guhathakurta (*op. cit.*), who narrates the experiences of Ripa Chakma from the Chakma indigenous community in Bangladesh. Ripa was from Kamalchhari Union in Khagrachhari, a region within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), which is predominantly inhabited by indigenous groups such as the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura peoples.

Due to financial hardships at home, Ripa migrated from CHT to Dhaka in search of better job opportunities. Already caught up in an underpaying job, Ripa further faced marginalization due to her indigenous identity. In the factory where she worked, indigenous women struggled against systemic discrimination, facing harsh treatment from a Bengali female supervisor who was constantly rude to them. Moreover, they had to contend with workplace favoritism, as Bengali supervisors prioritized hiring Bengali women, leaving indigenous workers with fewer opportunities and an even greater sense of exclusion. As a result of this discrimination, many indigenous women left their jobs, being further pushed to the peripheries. Delineating Ripa's struggle, Guhathakurta writes:

> In the factory where she works, there is a Bengali female supervisor who behaves very rudely towards all indigenous women workers. She does not want to give them off days. It is also believed by many that Bengali supervisor lobbied for Bengali girls to get jobs and hence conspired against

indigenous women. Her boss always took the Bengali worker's side if any quarrel occurred between the Bengali and Indigenous women (*ibid.,* p. 156).

This account lays bare how discrimination is not confined to men's dominance alone but extends into spaces shared by women. It exposes the precarity that indigenous women often confront and reflects on the biased exclusion they experience even from those who share their gender, thus revealing how deep-rooted social hierarchies fracture the possibility of female solidarity.

Speed (*op. cit.*) narrates the story of Belinda, an indigenous girl from Honduras, a Latin American country. Having been abandoned by her mother and later reclaimed by her, Belinda experienced emotional turmoil from a young age. Her stepfather sexually assaulted her, which led her to decide to migrate at the age of 14. She migrated from Honduras to Tapachula, a city in southern Mexico, where she started working as a live-in housekeeper. There, she was sexually assaulted, and became pregnant. Her employers fired her and subjected her to racial slurs, reflecting the intersectional discrimination faced by indigenous migrant women. Later, with no legal protection, she migrated to the United States, where her vulnerabilities as a migrant woman were again exposed. An officer of the border authority detained her and attempted to coerce her into exchanging sexual favors for release, an example of the institutionalized abuse many migrant women face.

The stories of Marina, Ripa, and Belinda reveal the profound vulnerabilities faced by indigenous migrant women as they navigate systemic discrimination, gender-based violence, and economic hardship. These stories mirror those of many other vulnerable women in similar situations. They reveal the dark side of discrimination against indigenous migrant women, whether they are from Latin America or South Asia. Based on their ethnicity, gender and social status, these women encounter oppressions at multiple levels. Such experiences and stories compel us to address the need to fill the legal void in order to ensure that the cycle of marginalization is broken. These stories also call for urgent legal protection, economic opportunities, and social justice.

Conclusion

While studying the struggles of indigenous migrant women, it is imperative to recognize the need for future research that examines the legal frameworks and gaps that continue to marginalize this vulnerable group. Although this study primarily focuses on

the socio-political dimension of the indigenous women's migration, it also opens new directions for scholars and policymakers to explore the legal dimensions that complement and extend the concerns discussed here. A strong legal framework is crucial to ensure the security and protection for indigenous migrant women. The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), an international treaty adopted by the International Organization (ILO), calls for the protection of indigenous workers' rights and their access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal recourse (ILO, 1989).

Merely signing this treaty is not enough unless countries ensure its implementation. The ILO should ensure compliance through reports and expert evaluation, while indigenous organizations, NGOs, and civil society should actively participate in ensuring that this treaty effectively improves indigenous people's lives, including indigenous women migrants. Awareness of indigenous identities should be strengthened to ensure state protection of indigenous women. Moreover, immigration policies need to be modified to reflect the special needs of indigenous migrant women. Many of these women migrate due to displacement caused by land loss, climate change, or political violence - factors often overlooked by immigration systems. Having special legal measures for indigenous asylum seekers and migrant laborers, including legal advice and culturally sensitive services, would help protect their rights (McKanders, *op. cit.*).

As indigenous political movements increasingly place gender at the center of their concerns, numerous settler-colonial states (such as Canada, Australia, and the United States) have begun legally acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples to self-governance and to the practice of their own culture. However, this has also raised significant questions about whether indigenous women enjoy equal rights and leadership opportunities within their community. This issue is further highlighted:

> As gender has begun to reshape Indigenous politics, the growing legal recognition in settler colony countries of the rights of Indigenous peoples to cultural and political autonomy has brought to the fore questions about Indigenous women's access to civil rights and sovereignty claims. Since the late 1980s and 1990s, developments in feminist theory and practice have enabled scholars to recognize how nationality, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity inform axes of gender differentiation (Huhndorf & Suzack, *op. cit*., p. 1).

The environments of migrants are often criminalized because of broad generalizations that associate them with disorder, illegality, or social instability. This erodes the

possibility of seeing migrants as an intersectional group, and erases their agency to build better lives. According to Acién González (2024, p. 10),

> [...] generalization leads to the victimization of all migrants and criminalizes their environment, making their strategies for developing their migratory projects invisible and multiplying the stigma they already bear.

As the intersectional identities of indigenous migrant women are often disregarded, these become a prime example of this generalization. Mainstream feminist discourse does not vocally advocate for the rights of indigenous migrant women. This lack of representation reinforces the invisibility of such women, leading to the high risk of definite exclusion from social justice initiatives. Thus, this paper voices the need to humanize the condition of migrant indigenous women who need more representation in both the legal framework as well as the mainstream theoretical discourses, such as feminism. A more intersectional approach should be employed in order to ensure the dismantling of the structures that promote exclusion. Furthermore, feminist advocates must ensure that they capture the full spectrum of women's experiences, especially those who are crushed under the burden of multiple layers of oppression. Justice cannot be served unless contemporary states move beyond the exclusions embedded in philosophical frameworks such as the classical social contract theory. Although classical social contract theory claimed to represent a collective or inclusive vision of society, it was in fact grounded in exclusion, constructed around the rights of property-owning men while disregarding women and other marginalized groups. This exclusion is reflected in the lived realities of indigenous migrant women, who continue to face systemic neglect and inequality. The continued failure of the state to address these structural exclusions further exposes the enduring limits of the social contract, calling into question its legitimacy as a framework of equality and protection. A renewed commitment is required to uphold the fundamental principles of the social contract theory, which guarantees protection, recognition, and reciprocity for everyone, particularly those who have historically been excluded.

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