Risks, Vulnerabilities and Aspirations of Seasonal Migrant Labourers

- **An exploratory study in South Delhi**

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Executive Summary

Seasonal migrant labourers form the backbone of India's urban informal economy, sustaining key sectors such as construction, domestic work, informal services, and petty trade. Yet, despite their critical contribution, migrant workers remain among the most vulnerable populations in urban India. Their lives are marked by informal employment, unsafe working conditions, insecure housing, limited access to social protection, and exclusion from public welfare systems. Women migrant workers experience compounded vulnerabilities due to gendered norms, wage disparities, and dependence within migration processes.

An exploratory qualitative study conducted among seasonal migrant labourers in South Delhi reveals that migration is largely distress-driven rather than aspirational, triggered by agrarian distress, lack of rural employment, declining viability of small farming, and seasonal nature of village-level work. While migration offers access to employment, it does not ensure stability or upward mobility. Migrant workers remain trapped in a cycle of long working hours, irregular wages, unsafe worksites, high rental costs, and dependence on contractors. Limited awareness and non-portability of welfare entitlements further intensify their vulnerability in urban settings.

At the same time, migrant workers articulate clear yet modest aspirations. These include secure and affordable housing, stable employment, education for their children, opportunities for skill development, and pathways towards better-paying and more dignified work. The exploratory study highlights a strong willingness among migrant workers to learn new skills; however, financial constraints, lack of accessible training, and weak linkages between training and employment prevent them from translating aspirations into improved livelihoods.

Existing evidence on seasonal migrant labourers is fragmented and insufficient to inform targeted policy and programme interventions. There is a critical need for a comprehensive, gender-responsive, and policy-oriented study that examines migrant labourers' experiences across the full migration cycle—covering work conditions, housing, health, social protection, and skill pathways—across both source and destination regions. Such evidence is essential for designing inclusive labour policies, urban interventions, and skill development programmes that respond to migrant workers' lived realities.

Proposed Project

The proposed project will undertake a multi-location, mixed-method study combining surveys, in-depth interviews, and stakeholder consultations with migrant workers, employers, contractors, training providers, and local institutions. Special attention will be given to women workers, young migrants, and families with children. The study will generate robust, disaggregated evidence to inform policy, programme design, and advocacy.

Expected Outcomes

- A comprehensive analytical report on risks, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of seasonal migrant labourers
- Actionable policy and programme recommendations on housing, labour protection, welfare portability, and skills
- Evidence-based inputs for designing migrant-responsive skill development and livelihood interventions

Conclusion

Seasonal migrant labourers are central to India's urban growth yet remain excluded from its benefits. Investing in this study will help bridge critical knowledge gaps and support the design of practical, scalable interventions that enhance dignity, security, and opportunity for migrant workers. The proposed project offers donors a strategic opportunity to contribute to inclusive urban development and labour justice grounded in evidence and experience

1. Introduction

Seasonal migration has emerged as a critical livelihood strategy for millions of households in rural India facing agrarian distress, limited non-farm employment, and growing economic insecurity. Seasonal migrant labourers—who move temporarily to urban centres in search of work—constitute one of the most vulnerable segments of India's workforce. Their lives are shaped by informality, uncertainty, and systemic exclusion from social protection mechanisms. Despite their indispensable contribution to urban economies, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work, petty trade, and informal services, migrant labourers remain largely invisible in policy frameworks and urban planning.

This exploratory study seeks to examine the lived realities of seasonal migrant labourers working in South Delhi, focusing on the **risks, vulnerabilities, and challenges** they face across the migration cycle—from decision-making in their villages to settlement and work in the city. Equally important, the study foregrounds the **aspirations of migrant workers**, especially their desire for stable livelihoods, improved living conditions, and opportunities for skill development that could enable upward mobility.

By centring the voices of migrant workers—both women and men—this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of migration not merely as an economic process, but as a deeply social and gendered experience marked by resilience, adaptation, and constrained choices.

2. Methodology and Profile of Respondents

2.1 Research Design and Approach

The study adopted a **qualitative, exploratory research design** to capture the nuanced experiences of seasonal migrant labourers. In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary method to allow respondents to articulate their migration journeys, work histories, everyday struggles, and aspirations in their own words. This approach enabled the research to go beyond surface-level indicators of employment and income and instead examine the emotional, social, and structural dimensions of migrant lives.

Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a thematic framework that covered:

- Occupational background prior to migration
- Triggers and drivers of migration
- Sources of information and networks facilitating migration
- Nature of work and adaptation to new occupations

- Risks, vulnerabilities, and challenges at work and in living spaces
- Access to public services and welfare schemes
- Aspirations, future plans, and interest in skill development

2.2 Sample and Field Locations

The fieldwork involved **thirty seasonal migrant labourers**, comprising **17 women and 13 men**, residing and working in different parts of South Delhi. Interviews were conducted at workplaces during free hours, as well as in living spaces, which allowed for observation of housing conditions and everyday survival strategies in an urban setting.

Field sites included:

- Munirka
- Bhikaji Cama Place
- Arjun Nagar
- Kotla
- Sarojini Nagar
- Netaji Nagar

These areas were selected due to the concentration of construction sites, informal markets, and migrant settlements.

2.3 Occupational Profile

Most respondents were engaged in:

- Construction work (helpers, masons, loaders)
- Domestic work
- Small-scale informal activities such as petty shops, food stalls, and pottery

Women migrants were primarily engaged in construction work as helpers, domestic work, or small vending activities. In most cases, their migration to Delhi was closely linked to their husbands' employment.

2.4 Socio-Demographic Profile

- **Place of Origin:**
    - 47% from Bihar
    - 30% from Uttar Pradesh
    - Remaining from Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan
- **Education:**
    - 66% had secondary or senior secondary education
    - Only three respondents were illiterate
    - Among women, most had education up to senior secondary level
- **Age Group:**
    - Majority were in the **30–40 years** age bracket, representing the core working-age population

This profile challenges the common perception that migrant labourers are largely uneducated, highlighting instead a mismatch between educational attainment and employment opportunities.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Triggers for Migration: Compulsion Rather than Choice

For the majority of respondents, migration was not a voluntary or aspirational decision but a **coping strategy born out of vulnerability**. The dominant trigger was the **search for stable employment and income**, particularly in the context of declining viability of agriculture.

Many respondents owned small or marginal landholdings or worked as agricultural labourers in their villages. However, agriculture was described as increasingly unsustainable due to:

- Low and uncertain returns
- Erratic rainfall and water scarcity
- Rising input costs
- Lack of timely access to seeds, fertilisers, and credit

In periods of crop failure or depleted food stocks, households had no alternative sources of income and were forced to borrow, often from informal sources. Seasonal employment

opportunities in villages—such as construction or road work—were limited and highly irregular. Competition for these jobs was intense, further reducing earning possibilities.

Gendered Dimensions of Migration Decisions

Women's narratives revealed additional layers of constraint. Social norms restricted their participation in paid work in villages. When permitted, their work was usually confined to assisting husbands on family land. Wage labour outside the household was socially discouraged, and low wages further reduced incentives.

Migration emerged as a pathway that, while risky, offered women at least some possibility of paid work in urban settings. For most families, migration was a **survival strategy** rather than a route to upward mobility.

3.2 Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Migration Process

3.2.1 Informality of Information and Networks

Migration decisions were largely shaped by **informal networks**—relatives, neighbours, or acquaintances who had previously migrated. These networks provided fragmented information about job availability and living conditions. Very few respondents had any formal engagement with labour contractors prior to migration.

Women, in particular, reported being completely unprepared for life in the city. Their migration was often sudden and dependent on their husbands' decisions, leaving them with little understanding of urban work environments or support systems.

3.2.2 Migration as Entry into Uncertainty

For many respondents, migration represented a leap into uncertainty. The initial period in the city was characterised by:

- Unpredictable job availability
- Long waiting periods before securing work
- Dependence on relatives or friends for shelter and food

Travel between home villages and Delhi was described as physically exhausting and financially draining, especially for families with children. Many migrants survived their initial months through borrowed money and informal credit, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Women experienced heightened insecurity due to their dependence on husbands for information, mobility, and decision-making. Limited autonomy compounded their sense of vulnerability in an unfamiliar environment.

3.3 Adapting to New Work: Survival Before Choice

Migration led to significant occupational shifts. Women who had never engaged in paid work began working as construction helpers, domestic workers, or vendors. Men entered a range of informal urban occupations.

However, employment choices were dictated by **immediate survival needs** rather than preference or skill alignment. The absence of training or orientation meant that workers learned on the job, often under harsh conditions.

The initial period was described as physically exhausting and emotionally stressful. Over time, migrants adapted through observation, repetition, and collective learning. Women spoke of developing confidence and resilience, though this adaptation came at considerable physical and emotional cost.

3.4 The Cycle of Risks and Vulnerabilities

3.4.1 Nature of Work and Employment Conditions

Informal employment exposed migrant workers to:

- Long and irregular working hours
- Absence of written contracts
- Delayed or uncertain wage payments
- No paid leave or compensation for injury

Women faced additional challenges, including wage discrimination and allocation of physically demanding tasks. Access to safety equipment was rare, particularly for those working at smaller construction sites.

Dependence on contractors for work and credit reduced workers' bargaining power, reinforcing a cycle of vulnerability.

3.4.2 Living Conditions: Insecurity and Overcrowding

Housing emerged as a major concern. Migrants lived in overcrowded rooms near worksites, paying high rents for substandard conditions. Shared toilets, limited water supply, and unreliable electricity were common.

The lack of secure and dignified housing exacerbated health risks and psychological stress.

3.4.3 Limited Access to Public Services

While most respondents possessed ration cards, these were linked to their home villages and could not be used in Delhi. Health issues arising from strenuous work were common, yet awareness of government health schemes was extremely limited.

Fear of bureaucratic procedures, lack of documentation, and long waiting times discouraged migrants from accessing public healthcare, pushing them towards expensive private or informal providers.

3.5 Changes Over the Past Five Years

Most respondents reported **little improvement** in their overall situation despite years of migration. While urban work offered higher nominal wages, rising living costs and job insecurity offset these gains.

Some reported marginal improvements in housing and amenities, but savings remained elusive. The inability to accumulate assets or invest in better livelihoods left many feeling trapped in low-paying, unstable work.

3.6 Aspirations Rooted in Survival and Dignity

Migrant workers' aspirations were modest yet deeply meaningful. The foremost aspiration was **secure housing**, followed by stable employment and education for children.

Skill development emerged as a key aspiration, with respondents expressing interest in short-term, practical training programmes that could lead to better jobs. However, lack of information, financial constraints, and limited access to training centres prevented them from pursuing these opportunities.

4. Learning, Skill Development and Pathways Forward

Despite a pervasive sense of limitation, most respondents expressed a strong desire to learn new skills. They sought training that was:

- Free or low-cost
- Located close to their homes
- Linked directly to employment opportunities

Their aspirations reflected not resignation, but a quiet determination to improve their lives if opportunities were made accessible.

5. Conclusion

The experiences of seasonal migrant labourers in South Delhi reveal a persistent struggle shaped by structural inequalities, informality, and exclusion from social protection. Migration offers survival but rarely security. Women face compounded vulnerabilities, yet migration also opens limited spaces for economic participation.

The resilience and aspirations of migrant workers underscore the urgent need for policies that move beyond short-term relief towards **long-term support systems**—including portable welfare benefits, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and inclusive skill development programmes. Supporting migrant labourers is not only a matter of social justice but essential for building equitable and sustainable urban economies.