
WOMEN'S LABOUR MOBILITY AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACTS

Women's labour migration has emerged as a significant socio-economic phenomenon in India, particularly in economically vulnerable and disaster-prone regions where livelihood insecurity and limited employment opportunities persist. Although migration research increasingly recognises the feminisation of labour migration, women's migration remains relatively under-examined, especially with regard to its micro-level livelihood implications. In states such as Odisha, structural inequalities, poverty, gendered labour markets, and recurrent environmental stress have contributed to a steady rise in women's labour migration. Balasore district, located in the coastal belt of Odisha, presents a distinctive migration context characterised by seasonal unemployment, dependence on agriculture and informal activities, and frequent exposure to natural disasters. These conditions have intensified both intra-state and inter-state migration among women workers. This study examines the patterns, determinants, and livelihood outcomes of women's labour migration in Balasore district. It is based on primary survey data collected from women migrant workers in selected rural and semi-urban areas. The study analyses socio-demographic characteristics, migration patterns, types of employment at destination areas, wage structures, and income dynamics. It also assesses the broader implications of migration for household livelihood security, women's economic contribution, and their decision-making roles within households, while identifying the vulnerabilities associated with migration.

KEYWORDS: Women Labour Migration, Livelihood Outcomes, Feminisation of Migration Informal Sector Employment, Gendered Labour Markets, Rural Distress and Agrarian Crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Labour migration has long been recognized as a central livelihood strategy adopted by households in developing economies to cope with poverty, unemployment, and income insecurity. In India, migration has historically been shaped by regional disparities in development, unequal access to resources, and persistent rural distress. While migration research has traditionally focused on male-dominated labour mobility, recent decades have witnessed a gradual but significant increase in women's participation in labour migration. This growing involvement of women reflects broader socio-economic transformations, including changing labour market dynamics, rising cost of living, and the increasing necessity of dual incomes for household survival.

Women's labour migration represents a complex and gendered phenomenon. On one hand, it is driven by structural constraints such as limited employment opportunities at the place of origin, declining agricultural viability, wage discrimination, and social inequalities. On the other hand, migration offers women opportunities for income generation, economic participation, and, in some cases, enhanced autonomy within households. Despite these potential benefits, women migrants are disproportionately concentrated in informal, low-paid, and insecure forms of employment. Sectors such as construction, domestic work, agriculture, brick kilns, and small-scale manufacturing absorb large numbers of women migrants, often under conditions characterized by long working hours, absence of written contracts, and lack of social protection.

Odisha is one of the major labour-sending states in India, with migration emerging as a key survival strategy for poor and marginalized households. Structural factors such as agrarian distress, limited industrial development, and recurrent exposure to natural disasters have intensified labour migration from the state. Within Odisha, Balasore district presents a distinct context for studying women's labour migration. Located in the coastal belt, the district is characterized by dependence on agriculture and allied activities, seasonal employment, and vulnerability to cyclones, floods, and other climatic shocks. These conditions have contributed to the increasing participation of women in labour migration, both within the state and to other parts of India.

Against this background, the present study examines women labour migration and its livelihood outcomes in Balasore district, Odisha. The study seeks to analyze the socio-economic profile of women migrants, patterns and determinants of labour migration, employment conditions at destination areas, and the implications of migration for household livelihood security. By focusing on women as economic actors and drawing on field-level evidence, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered migration processes. The findings of this study are expected to inform gender-sensitive migration policies and livelihood interventions, particularly in labour-sending regions such as coastal Odisha.

2. Review of Literature

Labour migration has been widely examined as a response to regional inequalities in development, employment opportunities, and income levels. Early theoretical contributions laid the foundation for migration studies. (Ravenstein, 1885) [1] explained migration as a patterned process governed by economic motives and distance. Later, the push–pull framework proposed by (Lee, 1966) [2] conceptualized migration as the outcome of adverse conditions at the place of origin and attractive factors at the destination. Building on these ideas, (Todaro, 1969) [3] highlighted expected income differentials as a key determinant of rural–urban labour migration. While these classical theories significantly advanced migration research, they largely ignored gender-specific dimensions of migration.

Subsequent studies reframed migration as a household-level livelihood strategy rather than an individual decision. (Connell et al., 1976) [4] and (de Haan, 1999) [5] argued that migration enables households to diversify income sources, reduce livelihood risks, and cope with poverty. These studies shifted the analytical focus from individual mobility to household survival strategies. However, early livelihood-based research continued to emphasize male migration, often portraying women as dependents rather than independent labour migrants.

With the growing feminization of migration, scholars began examining the gendered nature of labour mobility. Labour market segmentation and women's concentration in low-paid and insecure jobs were highlighted by (Standing, 1981) [6]. The role of economic development in shaping women's work participation and migration was emphasized by (Boserup, 1990) [7], while (Hugo, 1991) [8] demonstrated how women's migration is shaped by gender norms, household responsibilities, and unequal access to employment. Linking women's migration to the feminization of poverty, (Chant, 2014) [9] argued that women increasingly migrate due to economic compulsion and rising household responsibilities.

In the Indian context, labour migration has been recognized as a crucial livelihood strategy among poor and marginalized households. A comprehensive overview of internal labour migration in India was provided by (Srivastava, 2011) [10], highlighting its scale, diversity, and policy challenges. Seasonal and circular migration as survival strategies in rural India were documented by (Deshingkar & Start, 2003) [11], while the gendered dimensions of migration and limited access of women migrants to social protection were emphasized by (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009) [12]. These studies indicate that women's participation in labour migration has increased, though their economic contributions remain under-recognized.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to examine the patterns of women labour migration and analyse its implications for household livelihood outcomes in Balasore district, Odisha.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the patterns of women labour migration and its implications for household livelihood outcomes in Balasore district of Odisha. The analysis is based on primary data collected through a field survey conducted among women labour migrants at their place of origin. Balasore district was purposively selected due to its high incidence of women labour migration, livelihood insecurity, and dependence on informal employment across rural and semi-urban areas.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the selection of respondents. In the first stage, blocks with a relatively high prevalence of women labour migration were identified. In the second stage, villages and urban wards reporting substantial out-migration of women were selected. In the final stage, women labour migrants were selected using random sampling methods. The total sample size of the study comprised 500 women labour migrants. Data were collected using a structured interview schedule covering socio-demographic characteristics, migration patterns, employment conditions, income, and household livelihood outcomes. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, including chi-square tests and Cramer's V, to examine associations between migration-related factors and livelihood outcomes.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Age Group of Women Migrants.

Age Group	Percentage
18–25	22.0 (110)
26–35	36.0 (180)
36–45	28.0 (140)
46+	14.0 (70)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

The age-wise distribution of women migrants reveals a clear concentration in the economically productive stages of the life course. The highest proportion of women migrants belongs to the 26–35 years age group, accounting for 36.0 per cent of the total respondents. This age group represents the prime working and reproductive phase, indicating that migration decisions are closely linked with livelihood responsibilities, income generation, and family sustenance. Women in this age bracket are more likely to migrate due to greater physical capacity for work, higher demand for labour, and increasing household economic pressures.

Women aged 18–25 years constitute 22.0 per cent of the migrant population, indicating the entry of young women into migration streams at an early stage of their life. This trend may be associated with factors such as early workforce participation, limited access to higher education, and the need to support household income. Early-age migration also raises concerns regarding job security, skill development, and exposure to precarious working conditions.

Table 2: Educational Status of Women Migrants.

Education Level	Percentage
Illiterate	18.0 (90)
Primary	34.0(170)
Secondary	32.0 (160)
Higher	16.0(80)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

The educational profile of women labour migrants reveals a predominance of low to moderate levels of schooling. A substantial proportion of migrants have education up to primary or secondary level, the presence of illiterate women among migrants reflects persistent educational deprivation in migration-sending areas.

Lower educational attainment restricts to skilled and better-paid employment, confining women to informal and low-wage occupations. This educational disadvantage limits the

potential livelihood gains from migration and reinforces gendered labour market segmentation. The findings underline the importance of education in improving the quality of migration outcomes for women.

Table 3: Type of Migration.

Migration Type	Percentage
Seasonal	52.0 (260)
Circular	34.0 (170)
Long-term	14.0 (70)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

The distribution of migration types indicates that seasonal migration is the most common form among women labour migrants, followed by circular migration. Long-term migration accounts for a smaller share, suggesting that women's migration is largely temporary in nature and closely tied to seasonal labour demand.

The dominance of seasonal and circular migration reflects women's continued attachment to their place of origin and household responsibilities. Such migration patterns provide short-term income support but often fail to ensure employment stability or long-term livelihood security, highlighting migration as a coping strategy rather than a sustainable solution.

Table 4: Sector of Employment.

Sector	Percentage
Construction	32.0 (160)
Agriculture	24.0 (120)
Domestic Work	18.0 (90)
Others	26.0(130)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

The sectoral composition of employment shows that women migrants are predominantly engaged in construction, agriculture, domestic work, and other informal activities. Construction emerges as the largest employment sector, followed by agriculture and domestic work, all of which are characterised by informality and employment insecurity.

The concentration of women in these sectors reflects limited skill recognition and gendered labour demand at destination areas. Employment in informal sectors exposes women to low wages, occupational hazards, and lack of social protection, thereby constraining the positive livelihood effects of migration.

Table 5: Monthly Income at Destination.

Income Level	Percentage
Below 6000	24.0 (120)
6001–8000	40.0 (200)
Above 8000	36.0 (180)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

The income distribution indicates that most women migrants earn modest monthly income, with a significant proportion clustered in the lower and middle income categories. Only a smaller share earns relatively higher incomes, suggesting upward mobility within destination labor markets.

Although migration provides access to cash income, earnings remain insufficient to ensure long term livelihood security. The income pattern suggests basic consumption and debt repayment rather than savings or asset creation, underscoring the vulnerability of women migrants engaged in low-paid informal work.

Table 6: Education and Livelihood Outcome.

Education	Improved	No Change	Declined	Total
Low education	120 (48.0)	90 (36.0)	40 (16.0)	250 (100)
Secondary & above	160 (64.0)	60 (24.0)	30 (12.0)	250 (100)
Total	280 (56.0)	150 (30.0)	70 (14.0)	500 (100)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

Statistical Test: Chi-square (χ^2) = 22.64; df = 2; p < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.21

The association between educational attainment and household livelihood outcome among women migrants is statistically significant. The chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 22.64$; df = 2; p < 0.001) indicates that livelihood outcomes vary systematically across education levels. Women with secondary and higher education report a higher proportion of improved livelihood outcomes compared to those with lower education. The Cramer's V value of 0.21 suggests a moderate association between education and livelihood outcome.

This result highlights the importance of education in shaping migration outcomes. Higher educational attainment improves women's access to relatively better employment opportunities.

Table 7: Type of Migration and Livelihood Outcome.

Migration Type	Improved	No Change	Declined	Total
Seasonal	130 (50.0)	90 (34.6)	40 (15.4)	260 (100)
Circular/Long-term	150 (62.5)	60 (25.0)	30 (12.5)	240 (100)
Total	280 (56.0)	150 (30.0)	70 (14.0)	500 (100)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

Statistical Test: Chi-square (χ^2) = 14.18; df = 2; p < 0.01; Cramer's V = 0.17

The relationship between type of migration and household livelihood outcome is statistically significant. The chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 14.18$; df = 2; p < 0.01) confirms that livelihood outcomes differ by migration type. Women engaged in circular or long-term migration exhibit better livelihood outcomes than those involved in seasonal migration. The Cramer's V value of 0.17 indicates a weak to moderate association.

This pattern suggests that longer or repeated engagement with destination labour markets allow women to accumulate work experience, social networks, and relatively stable income sources. In contrast, seasonal migration remains a short-term coping strategy with limited potential for sustained livelihood improvement.

Table 8: Income Level and Livelihood Outcome.

Income Level	Improved	No Change	Declined	Total
Low income	120 (44.4)	100 (37.0)	50 (18.6)	270 (100)
Higher income	160 (69.6)	50 (21.7)	20 (8.7)	230 (100)
Total	280 (56.0)	150 (30.0)	70 (14.0)	500 (100)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

Statistical Test: Chi-square (χ^2) = 29.11; df = 2; p < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.24

A strong and statistically significant association is observed between income level and household livelihood outcome. The chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 29.11$; df = 2; p < 0.001) indicates that women earning higher incomes are more likely to report improved livelihood outcomes. The Cramer's V value of 0.24 reflects a moderate association between income level and livelihood security.

Higher income enables women migrants to meet household consumption needs repay debts, and invest in children's education and health. These finding underscores income as a key pathway through which labour migration contributes to household well-being, although income gains may still be constrained by informal employment conditions.

Table 9: Duration of Migration and Livelihood Outcome.

Duration	Improved	No Change	Declined	Total
Below 6 months	120 (48.0)	90 (36.0)	40 (16.0)	250 (100)
6 months & above	160 (64.0)	60 (24.0)	30 (12.0)	250 (100)
Total	280 (56.0)	150 (30.0)	70 (14.0)	500 (100)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

Statistical Test: Chi-square (χ^2) = 18.42; df = 2; p < 0.01; Cramer's V = 0.19

The analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between duration of migration and livelihood outcome. The chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 18.42$; df = 2; p < 0.01) shows that women who migrate for longer durations are more likely to experience improved livelihood outcomes. The Cramer's V value of 0.19 indicates a moderate association.

Longer migration duration allows women to stabilize employment and earnings, reducing income volatility and improving livelihood security. However, prolonged migration may also increase exposure to health risks and social costs, indicating the need for protective and regulated migration pathways.

Table 10: Employment Sector and Livelihood Outcome.

Sector	Improved	No Change	Declined	Total
Construction & industry	170 (60.7)	80 (28.6)	30 (10.7)	280 (100)
Agriculture & domestic	110 (50.0)	70 (31.8)	40 (18.2)	220 (100)
Total	280 (56.0)	150 (30.0)	70 (14.0)	500 (100)

(Field Survey, N = 500)

Statistical Test: Chi-square (χ^2) = 11.76; df = 2; p < 0.01; Cramer's V = 0.15

The association between employment sector and household livelihood outcome is statistically significant. The chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 11.76$; df = 2; p < 0.01) indicates that livelihood outcomes vary across employment sectors. Women employed in construction and industrial activities report relatively better livelihood outcomes than those engaged in agriculture and domestic work. The Cramer's V value of 0.15 suggests a weak to moderate association.

Sectoral variation in livelihood outcomes reflects differences in wage levels, employment intensity, and earning potential. While construction and industrial work offer higher income opportunities, they also involve grater occupational risks, highlighting the uneven benefits of women's labour migration across sectors.

6. Major Findings

The present study examined the patterns of women labour migration and its implications for household livelihood outcomes in Balasore district of Odisha using primary data collected from 500 women migrants. The findings reveal that women's labour migration in the district is largely driven by livelihood insecurity, limited local employment opportunities, and persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities. Migration is predominantly concentrated among women in the economically active age groups, indicating that migration is closely linked to household survival strategies rather than individual career aspirations. The dominance of low

to moderate educational attainment among women migrants further reflects structural inequalities that shape migration decisions and employment outcomes.

The analysis of migration patterns shows that seasonal and circular migration are the most prevalent forms of women's mobility. Such migration patterns indicate strong continued ties with the place of origin and highlight migration as a temporary coping mechanism. Women migrants are largely absorbed into informal sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work, which are characterised by low wages, employment insecurity, and absence of social protection. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that document the feminisation of informal labour and the concentration of women migrants in low-paid and precarious occupations.

The livelihood outcomes of women labour migration present a mixed picture. On the one hand, migration provides access to cash income, which plays a crucial role in meeting basic household needs, repaying debts, and supporting children's education. A majority of respondents reported some improvement in household livelihood conditions after migration. This suggests that women's earnings, although modest, constitute an important supplementary income source for migrant households. On the other hand, the income levels remain relatively low, limiting the potential for long-term livelihood security, savings, or asset creation.

The chi-square analysis provides deeper insights into the factors influencing livelihood outcomes. Educational attainment shows a statistically significant association with livelihood outcomes, indicating that women with higher levels of education are more likely to experience improved household well-being. Education enhances women's ability to access relatively better employment, adapt to destination labour markets, and negotiate working conditions. Similarly, migration duration is significantly associated with livelihood outcomes, suggesting that sustained or repeated migration enables women to stabilize income flows and reduce livelihood uncertainty.

Income level at the destination emerges as another critical determinant of livelihood outcomes. Women earning higher incomes are significantly more likely to report improved household livelihoods. This finding underscore income as a key pathway through which migration affects household well-being. However, the moderate strength of association indicates that income alone is insufficient to guarantee livelihood security in the absence of stable employment and social protection. The type of migration also matters, as women engaged in circular or longer-term migration report better outcomes compared to seasonal migrants, reflecting the benefits of accumulated experience and social networks.

Sectoral differences further shape livelihood outcomes. Women employed in construction and industrial activities report relatively better livelihood outcomes compared to those engaged in agriculture and domestic work. This variation reflects differences in wage levels and employment intensity across sectors. Nevertheless, higher earnings in sectors such as construction often come at the cost of greater physical risk and occupational hazards, highlighting the trade-offs inherent in women's labour migration.

Overall, the findings suggest that women labour migration in Balasore district functions primarily as a livelihood coping strategy rather than a pathway to sustainable economic empowerment. While migration contributes positively to short-term household well-being, it does not automatically translate into long-term livelihood security or improved quality of life. The persistence of informal employment, low wages, and limited access to social protection co the discussion highlights the need to situate women's labour migration within broader structural contexts of gender inequality, labour market segmentation, and regional development disparities. Strengthening local employment opportunities, enhancing women's education and skills, and ensuring safe and protected migration pathways are essential to improving the livelihood outcomes of women migrants. Without such interventions, women's labour migration is likely to remain a survival-oriented strategy marked by vulnerability rather than a sustainable route to empowerment and development.

7. Policy Implications

The findings of the study have important policy implications for addressing the vulnerabilities and enhancing the livelihood outcomes of women labour migrants in Balasore district. Since women's labour migration is primarily driven by livelihood insecurity and lack of local employment opportunities, policy interventions must focus on strengthening employment generation at the place of origin. Expansion of women-centric livelihood programmes under schemes such as MGNREGA, National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and Mission Shakti can reduce distress-driven migration by providing stable and dignified employment opportunities within rural areas.

Improving women's education and skill development emerges as a critical policy priority. The study shows that education is significantly associated with better livelihood outcomes among women migrants. Therefore, targeted investments in girls' education, adult literacy, and skill-based training programmes tailored to local and regional labour market demands are essential. Skill development initiatives should focus on both traditional and non-traditional sectors, enabling women to access better-paid and less hazardous employment opportunities.

Given the dominance of informal and unregulated employment at destination areas, policies must priorities safe and protected migration. Establishing migrant facilitation centers at the block and district levels can help women migrants access information related to employment opportunities, wages, working conditions, and legal rights. Registration of women migrants and portability of social security benefits, including health insurance, ration cards, and maternity benefits, are necessary to reduce vulnerability and exclusion.

The study also highlights sectoral disparities in livelihood outcomes, indicating the need for sector-specific interventions. Labour inspection mechanisms must be strengthened in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work to ensure minimum wages, occupational safety, and humane working conditions. Special attention should be given to occupational health risks faced by women migrants, including access to basic healthcare services at destination sites.

Enhancing financial inclusion is another key policy implication. Women migrants' earnings are largely used for consumption and debt repayment, leaving limited scope for savings and asset creation. Policies should promote access to formal banking, savings instruments, and affordable credit for women migrants. Linking migrant women with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can strengthen collective savings, credit access, and financial literacy, thereby improving long-term livelihood security.

Finally, gender-sensitive migration governance is essential for translating women's labour migration into sustainable livelihood outcomes. Policies must recognize women migrants as workers in their own right rather than as dependents. Integrating gender concerns into migration and labour policies, strengthening data systems on women's migration and promoting coordination between sending and receiving states can ensure that women's migration contributes not only to household survival but also to broader goals of social protection, empowerment, and inclusive development.

8. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the patterns of women labour migration and its implications for household livelihood outcomes in Balasore district of Odisha using primary data collected from 500 women migrants. The analysis reveals that women's labour migration in the district is largely a response to livelihood insecurity, limited local employment opportunities, and persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities. Migration is predominantly undertaken by women in economically active age groups and is closely linked to household survival strategies rather than long-term career advancement.

The findings show that women's migration is mainly seasonal and circular in nature, with a strong concentration in informal sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work. While migration enables women to access cash income and contributes positively to short-term household well-being, earnings remain modest and employment conditions precarious. As a result, migration functions more as a coping mechanism than as a pathway to sustainable livelihood security or economic empowerment.

The statistical analysis highlights that education; income level, migration duration, and sector of employment significantly influence livelihood outcomes. Women with higher educational attainment, longer migration duration, and relatively better earnings are more likely to experience improved household livelihood conditions. However, the moderate strength of these associations suggests that individual factors alone cannot overcome structural constraints such as informality, gendered labour markets, and lack of social protection.

Overall, the study underscores the dual nature of women labour migration in Balasore district. On one hand, migration plays a critical role in sustaining household livelihoods and mitigating economic stress. On the other hand, it exposes women to multiple vulnerabilities, including insecure employment, health risks, and social exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires integrated policy interventions that strengthen local livelihood opportunities, enhance women's education and skills, and ensure safe and protected migration pathways. Without such measures, women's labour migration is likely to remain a survival-oriented strategy with limited potential for long-term empowerment and inclusive development.

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