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Labour, Care, and Gendered Vulnerability: Moral Fault-Lines in Women's Migration and Emotional Economies

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Abstract

Women's migration across India has expanded in recent decades, not only due to economic need but also because of shifting familial responsibilities, domestic pressures, and social expectations. The labour migrant women perform cleaning, caregiving, elder support, emotional maintenance constitutes the invisible infrastructure of urban households and economies. Yet this labour is embedded within moral narratives that normalise women's exhaustion as duty. Drawing on pre-2021 scholarship in feminist care ethics, studies of global care chains,research on affective labour, and Indian philosophical reflections on dignity and śrama-dharma, this paper argues that gendered moral expectations produce forms of ethical invisibility and structural abandonment. Empirical insights from ILO, UN Women, NFHS-4/5 analyses, and domestic work studies illustrate how violence, precarity, and emotional depletion shape migrant women's lives. By reinterpreting dharma as shared moral responsibility rather than female endurance, the paper proposes a relational, justice-oriented ethic of care that situates women's bodily and emotional labour at the centre of moral and social well-being.

Keywords: care ethics; women's migration; affective labour; śrama-dharma; emotional economies; gendered vulnerability; moral responsibility; structural inequality

1. Introduction

Women's migration has become a defining feature of India's contemporary socio-economic landscape. Across Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and the Northeast, women travel to metropolitan regions as domestic workers, caregivers, nannies, medical attendants, cooks, and informal service providers. Their wages support families back home; their labour sustains households that rely on feminised caregiving; and their emotional availability binds multiple lives across distance. Yet despite this centrality, migrant women often experience marginalisation, invisibility, and moral burden.

Indian public culture continues to elevate the ideal of the self-sacrificing woman: the mother who absorbs hardship silently, the wife whose endurance becomes a measure of virtue, the

worker who does not complain. Such normative expectations shape how society interprets women's labour. Rather than recognising fatigue, deprivation, and pain as injustices, cultural narratives frame them as markers of moral worth. This paper argues that the contradiction between women's increasing mobility and persistent moral expectations creates a profound ethical challenge.The matter of concern here is to whom goes the responsibility for the woman who holds together the emotional and material lives of others.

To address this concern, the paper brings together three bodies of literature:

(1) feminist care-ethics (Held 2006; Kittay 1999, 2011; Robinson 2011),

(2) studies of global and transnational care chains (Parreñas 2001, 2015), affective labour (Bhattacharyya 2018), and informal domestic work in India (Desai 2010; Kumar 2019), and

(3) Indian philosophical discussions of dignity, ahiṃsā, and śrama-dharma, as seen in Gandhi's writings and Radhakrishnan's ethical interpretations.

Together, these frameworks illuminate how gendered, caste-inflected moral norms convert labour into silent obligation and emotional vulnerability into expected endurance.

2. Gendered Moralisation: How Duty Masks Exploitation

Across India, moral narratives frequently convert women's exhaustion into a sign of virtue. Feminist scholars have long argued that domestic labour becomes naturalised through cultural expectations of femininity (Rai 2016; Desai 2010). Women are expected to bear discomfort as part of their dharma, maintain patience, and accept servitude as ethical responsibility. These expectations intersect with caste and class hierarchies, producing what Bhattacharyya (2018) terms a "stratified emotional economy," in which upper-class households rely on the feminised, racialised, and caste-marked labour of poorer women.

In the context of migration, this moralisation becomes more acute. Long working hours are reframed as "dedication to the family." Surveillance and verbal reprimand are justified as "necessary discipline." Homesickness is treated as a test of emotional strength. What might otherwise be recognised as exploitation becomes sanctified as moral virtue. The ethical implications are profound: when exploitation adopts the language of morality, dissent is rendered illegitimate.

Robinson (2011) argues that global care chains operate not merely through economic inequalities but through moral expectations. The idea that women are naturally suited to caregiving, naturally responsible for others' emotional states, naturally obligated to endure. Such narratives prevent women from articulating their own needs, normalise asymmetry, and erase suffering. Held's (2006) critique of patriarchal moralities further illustrates how care becomes coercive when used to justify unequal labour distributions.

In India, these dynamics align with long-standing expectations of strī-dharma, where female virtue is associated with sacrifice, silence, and tolerance. When layered onto the vulnerabilities of migration,lack of legal protection, informality, employer dependency,this moral reframing strengthens the structural foundations of exploitation.

3. Care Ethics and the Problem of One-Sided Responsibility

Feminist care-ethics provides a powerful philosophical lens to resist the naturalisation of women's suffering. Rather than viewing care as a one-sided moral responsibility, care ethicists emphasise relationality, reciprocity, and justice.

Held (2006) argues that care is an ethical practice only when grounded in mutual recognition; when care becomes coerced, invisible, or uncompensated, it serves domination rather than morality. Kittay's (1999, 2011) work on dependency relations demonstrates how caregivers,often poor women,carry loads of emotional and physical labour that enable the flourishing of others. She contends that any ethical system that ignores caregiver vulnerability is unjust.

Ruddick's (1989) notion of "maternal thinking," although focused on mothering, provides conceptual tools for understanding migrant emotional labour. Attentiveness, preservation, and nurturance become moral practices shaped by dependency. But when societies exploit these capacities without offering support, they transform moral practices into structural burdens.

Robinson (2011) extends care ethics into the global domain, showing how transnational care chains create moral inequalities across countries, classes, and households. Her arguments apply directly to Indian migrant domestic work. As women care for the children and elderly of affluent employers, their own families depend on long-distance emotional labour, often unsupported.

Thus, care ethics reframes migrant women's labour as central to the moral fabric of society, not as marginal duty. The problem, then, is not that migrant women fail to fulfil care; it is that societies fail to reciprocate, recognise, or protect their labour.

4. Emotional Economies of Migration

Migration is not only a movement of bodies; it is a redistribution of emotional labour. Parreñas's (2001, 2015) research on transnational families shows that migrant women sustain multiple households through what she calls "emotional remittances" expressions of concern, affection, guidance, and reassurance transmitted across borders or states. This emotional work holds families together even when physical presence is impossible.

Indian scholars have noted similar dynamics within internal migration. Desai (2010) and Bhattacharyya (2018) observe that migrant workers often manage crises at home. Illness, conflict, financial pressure via mobile phones, remittances, and constant emotional availability. Their affective labour becomes as valuable as their wages, yet remains unrecognised.

Affective labour produces significant psychological costs. Studies prior to 2021 link such emotional demands to loneliness, guilt, depression, and fatigue (Parreñas 2015; Kumar 2019). When women are simultaneously expected to be ideal workers and ideal mothers/daughters, emotional contradictions become internalised.

This emotional economy is also shaped by inequality. Employers frequently expect migrant women to maintain cheerful demeanours, availability, and politeness, even when overworked. Bhattacharyya (2018) notes that emotional discipline becomes part of the job, workers must suppress their own distress to maintain the household harmony of others.

Thus, emotional labour becomes a site of ethical conflict. Women's emotions serve the stability of others while their own emotional needs remain unmet.

5. Gandhian Śrama-Dharma and the Crisis of Dignified Labour

Indian philosophical traditions offer important resources for critiquing gendered exploitation. Gandhi's reflections on śrama-dharma,the dignity inherent in honest, self-respecting labour, challenge caste-based and gender-based devaluation of work. Labour, for Gandhi, possesses moral worth when grounded in autonomy, mutual respect, and non-humiliation.

Read in this context, the conditions of migrant domestic workers with long hours, restricted mobility, lack of rest, absence of recognition violate the core Gandhian principles of dignity and ahiṃsā. When labour is extracted through vulnerability rather than offered freely, it loses moral legitimacy.

Radhakrishnan's (1932) interpretation of dharma as truth-guided, context-sensitive action provides another ethical lens. Dharma does not require submission to suffering. Rather, it demands actions that protect dignity and promote well-being. The frequent invocation of dharma to justify women's endurance therefore represents a misinterpretation rather than an extension of Indian moral philosophy.

Contemporary feminist scholars in India have argued that re-reading dharma through the lens of dignity, rather than sacrifice, aligns Indian philosophy with global feminist ethics (Nussbaum 2000). When dharma is seen as shared social responsibility, not individualised endurance, households, employers, and communities acquire ethical duties toward caregivers.

6. Evidence of Structural Abandonment

Empirical studies prior to 2021 provide abundant evidence that migrant women's vulnerabilities are not isolated experiences but structural conditions.

The NFHS-4 (2015–16) and early NFHS-5 (2019–21) data show high prevalence of domestic violence, limited decision-making autonomy, and disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities. UN Women (2019) highlights that migrant women experience higher risks of verbal abuse, wage theft, and sexual harassment, often with minimal access to grievance mechanisms.

ILO reports (2010, 2018) document that domestic workers most of whom are internal migrants, face informal contracts, absence of fixed hours, and employer dependency. These vulnerabilities increase emotional stress, reduce mobility, and heighten social isolation.

Kumar's (2019) study of domestic work in Delhi found widespread patterns of unpaid overtime, surveillance, retention of identity documents, and restrictions on movement. These conditions mirror the global patterns identified by Parreñas (2015) and Robinson (2011),

where domestic work operates at the intersection of emotional servitude and economic precarity.

The term “structural abandonment” aptly captures this dynamic. Women’s labour sustains the functioning of households and urban economies, yet they remain excluded from social protection, legal visibility, and emotional support.

7. Reinterpreting Dharma: From Female Endurance to Shared Responsibility

The frequent cultural invocation of dharma to justify women’s endurance requires philosophical correction. Classical and modern Indian thought do not endorse suffering as virtue. Instead, they emphasise dignity, compassion, and truth.

Reinterpreting dharma through a care-ethical framework yields three implications

(1) Dharma as relational, not unilateral

If care is relational, as Held and Robinson argue, then dharma cannot be placed solely on women. Households, employers, and the state bear duties of recognition, protection, and reciprocity.

(2) Compassion (dayā) as structural obligation

When dayā is interpreted as collective responsibility, support structures,legal protections, safe workplaces, rest periods become ethical imperatives, not policy options.

(3) Ahiṃsā as emotional non-injury

Emotional harm such as neglect, dismissal, over-exhaustion is as much a violation of ahiṃsā as physical injury. Migrant women’s emotional depletion thus reveals a moral failure of society, not of individual character.

Through this reinterpretation, dharma becomes aligned with global justice-based care ethics, a call for shared moral responsibility, not unilateral endurance.

8. Conclusion

The migrant woman worker stands at the intersection of economic necessity, emotional labour, and moral expectation. Her labour sustains homes, supports children and elders, stabilises emotional ecosystems, and contributes to the functioning of urban economies. Yet her dignity remains precarious, her emotional needs unacknowledged, and her suffering moralised as virtue.

This paper has argued that feminist care ethics, studies of affective labour, and Indian philosophical traditions jointly reveal the moral fault-lines shaping women’s migration. Care, when coerced or unreciprocated, becomes a site of injustice. Emotional labour, when invisibilised, becomes a source of depletion. Dharma, when misinterpreted, becomes a tool of gendered control rather than ethical guidance.

A more just moral framework requires recognising women’s labour both physical and emotional as central to collective well-being.Moral education must challenge narratives

equating female virtue with silence.Policy frameworks must ensure legal protections for domestic workers.Public discourse must shift from praising endurance to affirming dignity.The true ethical measure of society lies not in its rhe Bhattacharyya toric but in how it treats those whose labour sustains its everyday life.

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