



Mr. P Lakshapathy

Founder and executive director of APSA.

Interviewer: Sunaina Nayak

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Women and Migration

People around the world are leaving their homelands, many in search of better opportunities and for the security of their families and their livelihoods. Migration has become a means of escape from poverty or conflicts.

The causes, needs and risks involved vary drastically based on one's gender and are essential in understanding the issues involved and responding to them.

The following interview with Mr.P Lakshapathy, founder and executive director of APSA delves into the role of gender in migration.

APSA, also referred to as the Association for Promoting Social Action works towards preventing the exploitation of the underprivileged as well as the migrant community.

Tell us a little about APSA and the nature of the work that the organization does?

APSA is a Grassroot organisation that focuses on child centred community development.

The organization works in both the cities of Secunderabad and Bangalore in about one hundred slums. We also work with the migrant population alongside builders who employ migrant construction workers in their labour colonies. We work towards improving their living conditions such as availability of clean water, sanitation and housing.

Apart from these we also have institutions for child care and protection, a residential facility for about 200 children who require medical care, shelter and protection. We also have an exclusive home called Suraksha for girls who are trafficked/ abused. These are some activities APSA has been doing for the past 40 years.

What are the migrant communities that APSA interacts with and where are they migrating from?

Earlier most of the migrants arrived from neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu , Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. In the past 10 years of Bangalore's rapid growth we have witnessed an influx from communities from all the states. UP, Bihar, Orissa, WB, Jharkhand, Bangladesh. Many of them are moving in search of livelihood.

Do you believe that gender plays a role in migration? What are the percentages of women that migrate compared to that of men?

In our experiences, the majority of the migrant community is male, with a very less percentage of women migrants.

The whole family usually migrates in cases of bonded labour which

is prevalent in the brick industry. We have rescued hundreds of people from factories where they are exploited and suffer in inhuman living conditions. In such industries, we've seen families including children working. But in the construction sector, the majority of the migrant population is male, accompanied sometimes by the family.

What do you think are the main factors that cause women to migrate? How are they different from those of the male migrants?

One reason is the lack of employment opportunities in their own hometowns. They are forced to migrate, usually with the male partner in order to survive.

Another reason is that there is nothing left for them back home, without land, shelter, and a means of sustaining a livelihood the only option left is to move. Back in the village there is no guarantee that they'll be paid fairly for the work that they do. Usually working in the fields earn them some meagre part of the yield at the end of harvest season. This makes it hard for them to sustain their families.

What are the risks faced by these women?

Women migrants face a lot of insecurities. They face abuse and violence mainly due to the nature of their living situations, usually lacking civic amenities such as toilets, drinking water and lack of street lighting.

These vulnerabilities are usually taken advantage of and the women often live under constant fear.

What are the Constraints faced by the women migrants? Such as Restrictive social norms, stigma etc

They do feel a sense of inferiority against the local people, a feeling that stems from being considered an outsider. Not being able to speak the local language, having no connection to the local environment they feel threatened by the others that live around.

A single woman who migrates in search of work will find survival more difficult if not surrounded by people she can identify with. With no one to provide a sense of security she might face criticism and comments about the nature of her work. Oftentimes we receive complaints where such women are faced with verbal and physical abuse.

How are such issues regarding society dealt with?

It is only when such incidents are notified, or the victim speaks about the abuse that any action can be done regarding it. But what we witness is that the victim feels helpless in these situations. They feel taking action against the abuse would create a threat against their lives.

As our system currently functions, it takes time for a complaint to be registered and even more for the accused to be brought to justice, this entire time the victim lives in fear.

There are organizations that provide support and take action against the abuse legally. But it takes time

during which the victim will have stopped working and lose out on earnings.

How do living conditions affect the migrants?

When migrants come to the city from their homes they are financially broke, so much that they lack the means to stay even in notified slums. Without local contacts or vacancies in such slums, they occupy spaces outside the city limits where they stay in improvised shelters.

This too does not come easy, in our work we've seen instances where they pay rent (upto 400-500 rs a month) for these tents made of bamboo and plastic, sometimes with advances of 2000 rs.

How helpful is the government in helping women migrants with their economical problems?

Usually they are treated as a population that will eventually return to their homes and so there aren't many privileges that the community is provided.

The construction welfare board provides benefits to construction workers. But in order to get identified as a construction worker they need certification from a builder, contractor or a union.

This process again is not easy. These days the process has been moved online as well, but without access to a smart phone or internet and no knowledge on the registration process it only makes it more inaccessible to the workers.

How do the women migrants adapt to the city? Do they arrive with the thought of leaving soon?

It does take time considering how different the living is in a city. But what we also see is that they limit themselves to the pocket in which they live and work. It takes time until they are more familiar with the language and the city for them to leave these boundaries and to explore the city and other living situations.

It is only after living in the city for a while that they learn the ropes of living here, to be able to communicate and bargain allows them to earn enough to save up. It is a long term decision when they decide to move to the city and unless there are very difficult circumstances forcing them to move back.

What are the effects of the pandemic on the initiatives taken by the organization?

When we work with a community it takes a lot of time for us to establish a connection with them, to understand their situations and get accepted by them.

The pandemic has affected progress in which we need to start anew each time.

How do you help the migrants avail benefits that they are due?

The welfare board provides various schemes for the benefit of construction workers. And almost 90% of

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the migrant workers are engaged in construction and related activities.

The process of getting registered is difficult for the workers on their own, this is where organisations such as ours can provide help. To establish an identity, we get them in touch with the workers union where they receive certification. The next steps would be to open up a bank account.

Each step has a hurdle to be overcome, to open a bank account one needs proof of address. Fortunately the ID issued by the board contains an address, so even if the door number or the exact location is missing, it mentions the street or the closest landmark. This allows them to open bank accounts, making them eligible to receive financial benefits.

Finally, what changes do you see happening in the future? What reforms do you wish to witness and what are the challenges that are expected in the future?

We've been talking about the issues in various platforms of the state government and interacting with the labour department. With the kind of construction happening in cities like Bangalore, including government projects such as roads and flyovers, there is undoubtedly an accumulation of funds. This is because any project that costs more than 10 lakhs pays 1% of it towards workers welfare.

The government can take up initiative to reduce the difficulties of the migrant workers by renting affordable living spaces, they can be granted safe living conditions for almost the same price that they are currently paying to pitch tents on private land.

Another problem is regarding social security, there must be measures that must be taken to protect against such insecurities. These are policy decisions that are political in nature and hence bring certain challenges within them.