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Gendered Economic Impact of Migration: Perspectives from Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits

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Abstract

Migration, often a result of conflict and displacement, carries significant economic consequences for both individuals and communities. This paper investigates the gendered economic impacts of migration among Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits, two communities uprooted by prolonged ethnic and political strife. The focus is on how gender influences the economic opportunities and survival strategies of migrants in diasporic settings, specifically in labor market participation, access to education, entrepreneurial ventures, and overall economic integration.

Both Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits have faced immense challenges as refugees or displaced persons, but the economic outcomes of migration vary substantially along gender lines. For women, migration often redefines traditional roles, as they balance family responsibilities with economic survival, sometimes taking up informal sector work or engaging in community-based entrepreneurship. Men, on the other hand, tend to have greater access to formal employment but still face barriers such as discrimination or skill mismatches in host countries.

By comparing these gendered experiences, this study emphasizes how social and cultural expectations around gender shape the economic resilience of migrant communities. It highlights how gendered narratives of suffering and survival are intertwined with economic strategies, revealing the complex relationship between displacement, survival, and socio-economic adaptation. Through the lens of both male and female migrants, this research offers valuable insights into the broader consequences of forced migration and provides a more holistic understanding of how gender influences economic resilience in the face of displacement.

Keywords - Gendered Migration, Economic Impact, Sri Lankan Tamils, Kashmiri Pandits, Diaspora Resilience

Introduction

Migration, often a consequence of political conflict and ethnic strife, has profound economic and social implications for displaced communities. Among those affected, the Sri Lankan Tam-

ils and Kashmiri Pandits represent two communities whose forced migration reshaped their economic realities in host regions. The gendered aspect of this migration remains crucial in understanding how men and women adapt differently to economic displacement. This paper examines the economic consequences of migration from a gendered perspective, focusing on employment opportunities, educational access, entrepreneurial activities, and overall economic integration. Migration, whether voluntary or forced, has historically reshaped economic structures and individual livelihoods. Among the many displaced communities worldwide, Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits stand out as groups who have faced significant upheaval due to ethnic and political conflicts. The Sri Lankan Tamil migration was largely triggered by the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), which led to the mass exodus of Tamils to India, Europe, and North America. Similarly, the insurgency in Kashmir in the late 1980s and early 1990s forced Kashmiri Pandits to flee their homeland, with many relocating to other parts of India.

While migration offers new opportunities, it also presents considerable economic challenges, which are often shaped by gender. Gendered economic experiences refer to the differing ways in which men and women engage with labor markets, access educational and financial resources, and participate in entrepreneurship post-migration. Women, for instance, frequently take up informal or low-wage work due to socio-cultural constraints, while men are more likely to access formal employment, albeit with barriers such as discrimination and skill mismatches. The displacement of both Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits has, therefore, led to significant shifts in economic roles within these communities.

This study aims to analyze the economic adaptation strategies of these displaced groups from a gendered perspective. By comparing their labor market participation, educational access, entrepreneurial activities, and social challenges, this research highlights the com-

plex relationship between gender, displacement, and economic survival. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for formulating policies that facilitate gender-inclusive economic integration for migrant communities.

Economic Challenges Faced by Displaced Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit Migrants

Migration-induced displacement leads to severe economic vulnerabilities that vary across communities but share a common thread of marginalization and precarity. Sri Lankan Tamil migrants particularly those in refugee camps in South India, often face structural barriers, such as lack of recognition of their skills, widespread labour discrimination and excessive reliance on the informal and low-wage sectors. In contrast, Kashmiri Pandits often face a paradox of over-qualification, where their educational and occupational backgrounds fail to secure suitable employment opportunities in their host regions. However, both groups suffer financial insecurity and limited economic mobility, conditions particularly severe for women which further reinforce deep gender inequalities.

Sharika Thiranagama's ethnographic account in *In My Mother's House* highlights the severe economic marginalisation of Tamil refugees showing how displacement undermines the gendered divisions of labour and places increased economic burdens on women. She states: "Male unemployment ... 61 percent reported that they were unemployed. ... The little work available ... Tractorization has rendered men's work in agriculture defunct, leaving 'women's work' of plucking and weeding. ... The women were paid low wages ... and were nonetheless expected to return home and perform the majority of household labor" (Thiranagama 175). This account not only demonstrates the collapse of traditional male employment structures but also shows how women's labor already undervalued became a central, yet precarious, means of survival. Women were exploited in low-paid agricultural work on the one hand and were assigned unpaid domestic responsibilities on the other which further increased their economic

vulnerability due to displacement.

Rahul Pandita’s memoir, “Our Moon has Blood Clots”, presents a similar story of the everyday humiliation of Kashmiri Pandits forced to live in refugee camps. He recalls instances of food shortages, writing: “By the time we reached the entrance of the camp, a queue had already formed in front of a load a carrier filled with tomatoes... One of the men distributing them procured a rusty knife. They began to cut the tomatoes into half and give them away” (Pandita 7). The image of displaced families waiting for half a tomato, in addition to material distress also highlights the loss of self-reliance and dignity. Such situations represent the erosion of economic identity and reinforce a sense of alienation for a community accustomed to middle-class security and professional stability.

Together, these stories demonstrates that displacement for Kashmiri Pandits and Si Lankan Tamils meant more than just losing their means of livelihood. People lost their dignity, established social and occupational statuses were destroyed and women were disproportionately subjected to various forms of exploitation. Thus, the economic effects of forced migration went far beyond material deprivation and resulted in long-term structural inequality that transformed the displaced groups’ sense of identity and existence.

Table 1: Economic Challenges Faced by Displaced Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit Migrants

Challenges	Sri Lankan Tamils	Kashmiri Pandits
Employment Barriers	Skill recognition issues, labor discrimination	Over qualification for available jobs
Informal Sector Dependency	Women in garment industry, home-based work	Women in teaching, cottage industries
Financial Constraints	Limited capital for entrepreneurship	Dependence on government compensation
Social Integration	Discrimination in host countries	Cultural adaptation in new urban settlements
Psychological Impact	Loss of homeland affects economic motivation	Uncertainty about returning to Kashmir

Gendered Labor Market Participation of Displaced Migrants

"Gender plays a crucial role in shaping labor market participation among displaced communities. As seen in Table 2, men from both Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit backgrounds generally have better access to formal employment, often securing jobs in IT, engineering, or finance. Conversely, women tend to be concentrated in caregiving, teaching, and informal labor sectors. Entrepreneurship has emerged as an economic survival strategy, with both men and women engaging in small-scale businesses, albeit with varying levels of access to resources and market opportunities."

Table 2: Gendered Labor Market Participation of Displaced Migrants

Sector	Sri Lankan Tamil Men	Sri Lankan Tamil Women	Kashmiri Pandit Men	Kashmiri Pandit Women
Formal Employment	IT, engineering, skilled labor	Nursing, caregiving, education	Government jobs, IT, finance	Teaching, office jobs
Informal Employment	Small businesses, transport work	Garment industry, domestic work	Family businesses, freelancing	Handicrafts, tuition classes
Entrepreneurship	Small-scale businesses, restaurants	Home-based businesses, tailoring	Retail shops, consultancy	Cultural handicrafts, boutiques

The experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees clearly illustrate this phenomenon. As one account describes: “In the refugee camps, there was no permanent employment available, only hard labour. To feed themselves, they moved to villages in the north where they could grow crops, earn wages as agricultural labourers, and also find protection from the Sinhalese. In this way, they moved from place to place and worked in peasant groups-some as custodians of the landlords’ estates and some as caretakers of the fields. Similarly, Sethevi and Mariyappan came to Village No. 3 and worked in the harvest, thereby earning their livelihood as agricultural labourers.” (Ganesalingam62)

Similarly, war conditions in Jaffna led to a sharp decline in agricultural opportunities, further limiting women’s labour options: “With the onset of war conditions, changes began to occur in Jaffna’s villages. Truck traffic to Colombo decreased and cultivation of onions, chillies and potatoes was greatly reduced. As a result, opportunities for wage labour in the plantations declined.” (Ganesalingam 80)

Together, these evidences show how Tamil women, in particular, were pushed into low-wage agricultural and care roles, where they often had to perform both productive and reproductive tasks. Their contribution, though essential to survival, remained undervalued and insecure.

Similar patterns can be observed among Kashmiri Pandit women who were displaced to refugee camps in Jammu, forcing them to take up menial or informal labour, despite prior education. Thus, while men in both communities had limited opportunities to reconstruct their professional identities through formal employment, displaced women disproportionately bore the dual burden of economic exploitation and domestic responsibility. Entrepreneurship emerged as a survival strategy, both men and women engaged in small businesses such as tailoring, petty shops or selling food, but women’s access to capital, networks and market opportunities continued to be limited.

Gendered Economic Adaptation Strategies

Labor Market Participation

Men from both displaced communities have faced employment barriers, such as credential recognition and labor market discrimination. However, their access to formal employment has been relatively higher than women’s. For Sri Lankan Tamil women, labor market participation often involves domestic work, garment industry jobs, or home-based enterprises, whereas

Kashmiri Pandit women have transitioned into education and service-sector jobs.

Educational Access and Skill Development

Education plays a critical role in the economic adaptation of displaced communities. Sri Lankan Tamil migrants, particularly in Western countries, have prioritized higher education for their children, which has improved economic outcomes over time (McDowell, 1996). Kashmiri Pandits, with their historical emphasis on education, have leveraged their skills to access employment opportunities, particularly in information technology and academia (Kaul, 2018).

Entrepreneurship and Informal Economy

Entrepreneurship has been a significant survival strategy. Tamil women, particularly in India, have established micro-enterprises such as tailoring and food businesses. Similarly, Kashmiri Pandit women have engaged in cottage industries, leveraging their cultural knowledge to create traditional Kashmiri handicrafts. However, challenges such as limited financial resources and gender norms often hinder their business expansion.

Social and Cultural Challenges in Economic Integration

Gender norms within displaced communities influence economic roles. While migration has allowed women to take up new economic responsibilities, it has also led to double burdens, as they balance work with domestic responsibilities. For men, economic displacement has sometimes resulted in identity crises, particularly when they are unable to secure employment that aligns with their previous socio-economic status.

Conclusion

The economic experiences of displaced Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits are sig-

nificantly shaped by gender dynamics, reflecting broader societal norms, host country policies, and the adaptability of individuals. While migration has opened avenues for economic participation, the extent of these opportunities differs for men and women due to pre-existing gender roles and structural barriers in labor markets.

For many Sri Lankan Tamil women, displacement has often led to their increased participation in informal labor sectors, such as garment work, caregiving, and home-based enterprises, as they navigate both financial survival and domestic responsibilities. Similarly, Kashmiri Pandit women, particularly those resettled within India, have found work in education, administrative roles, and small-scale entrepreneurship. However, both groups continue to face limited access to formal employment, wage disparities, and restricted upward mobility due to gender norms and societal expectations that influence career choices.

Men in both communities, on the other hand, generally have greater access to formal employment but still encounter challenges such as skill mismatches, employment discrimination, and economic instability. In host countries or new regions, qualifications obtained before displacement may not be fully recognized, forcing many to accept jobs that are below their skill level. Additionally, social integration difficulties and economic competition often create further barriers to financial stability.

The economic adaptation of these migrant communities is thus not only a matter of labor market access but is also influenced by cultural expectations, legal frameworks, and community networks. Addressing these gendered economic disparities is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable economic policies that enhance the long-term resilience and self-sufficiency of displaced populations. By acknowledging the specific struggles and contri-

butions of both men and women, policymakers and stakeholders can develop targeted interventions that facilitate sustainable economic integration and empowerment.

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