Chapter 1

Introduction

Women’s status is a multi dimensional entity and different studies tend to focus on different aspects of the status (Ravindran 1999). Various components of the status may move in different directions in a given time period so defining ‘improvement’ may be difficult. Dixon (1978) defines women’s status as their overall position in society, and distinguishes this from power which identifies with women’s ability to influence and control at the interpersonal level. Although geographically men and women share the same space, they live in two different worlds. The mere fact that ‘women hold up half the sky’ does not give them a position of dignity and equality. Sprawling inequalities persist in control over resources, with women facing tighter time constraint, less access to information and health services, poorer mental health and lower self esteem.

Women in most societies suffer from lower status compared to men due to cascading discriminations they face at every stage of life and access to every means of development (Kishor and Gupta 2004). In almost every sphere of human functioning, roles are defined for women which are subordinate to men, fewer in number, and obligations more limiting (Kishor and Gupta 2004). Discrimination starts from the family itself - in asset ownership, decision making, control over income (Mohanty and Tripathy 2005), food allocation, education, medical facilities, property and inheritance. Women are discriminated against, irrespective of income class and caste (Miller 1981, 1992).

However, the awareness regarding women’s status is relatively new. In the year 1975, The First World Conference on the Status of Women was convened in Mexico City (World Conference on Women, Mexico City, June 19- July 2,1975) to coincide with the 1975 International Women’s Year, to remind the international community that discrimination against women continues to be a persistent problem in much of the world. The conference along with UN decades for women 1976-85 proclaimed
by the General Assembly five months later at the urging of the conference, launched a new era in global efforts to promote advancement of women by opening a worldwide dialogue on gender equality. A process was set in motion, a new chapter in learning. The approach marked a change which had started to take shape in the early 1970s in the way that women were perceived. Whereas previously women had been seen as passive recipient of support and assistance, they were now viewed as full and equal partners with men, with equal rights to resources and opportunities, and a new thinking evolved, that development is not possible without the full participation of women.

Equality between men and women matters for development, which is why the 2012 World Development Report (WDR) will focus on this vital topic. Since the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day is March 8, gender was chosen as the focus for the WDR 2012, in part because gender equality can lead to better development outcomes, and because, development is a process of expanding freedoms equally for all individuals. This view assumes that gender equality is a core goal in and of itself, and that people’s welfare shouldn’t be determined by their birthplace or whether or not they were born male or female (World Bank Development Report 2012).

This current report analyses the impressive progress in gender indicators on many fronts. However, it also reveal that in many domains — whether in the realms of power and decision making or maternal health — outcomes for women have improved very slowly or not at all (World Bank Development Report 2012).

Section 1.1: Why Status of international women migrants

The migration of women has always been an important component of international migration. Women often migrate officially as dependent family members of other migrants, or to marry someone in another country (Roberts 1997). Female migrants are, however, increasingly becoming part of flows of migrant workers, moving on their own to become the principal wage earners for their families. Women are no
longer passive movers following the males. Worldwide women migrants represent half of the migrant population, in some countries comprising 70-80% of total migrants (Dias et al. 2001). Previous approaches to documenting and understanding international migration have often disregarded the migration of women. Analytical frameworks either ignored the participation of women in international migration and their contributions, or assumed that the causes and consequences of international migration were similar for migrant women and migrant men, thus avoiding an investigation of how migration and its outcomes differ by sex. It is important to understand the causes and consequences of international migration from a gender perspective because hierarchical social relations related to gender, shape the migration experiences of migrants, whether male or female. In the present study, however, we have not gone into male-female differences, but concentrated on international female migration.

As is the case with internal migration, international migration has both grown exponentially in scale over the last four decades and experienced a significant degree of feminisation (UN 1995, UN –INSTRAW 1994, 2007), which is applicable to Developed and Less Developed Countries (LDC). Filipino housemaids in Switzerland, Thai sex workers in Japan and Australia, Sri Lankan housemaids in Singapore and Filipino women arriving in Korea, Germany and Australia as brides, are only a few of the examples of the operations of the burgeoning immigration industry (Brockett 1996).

Although the increasing involvement of women in international migration in Developed Countries in the last two decades has been a striking development, it has been even more substantial in LDCs. Whereas international migration was of only minor significance in most LDCs for the first three post-war decades, it now influences almost all countries and no longer involves a small, usually male, highly educated group, as was the case previously. The movement now involves not only skilled but also unskilled and semi-skilled groups, and women are not only a significant component, but they dominate many major international migration streams (Gulati 1997, Hugo 1997).
Globalization has contributed to an increasing flow of migrant workers from countries with limited economic opportunities to fill gaps in nations with a dwindling labour supply. Women migrants display considerable enterprise. They contribute to the economic development of their countries of destination through their competencies and skills, and to that of their countries of origin through their remittances and their increased experience when they return to those countries. By creating new economic opportunities, migration can promote economic independence and status for women workers, who provide safety nets that sustain communities at home. Studies (UN Women 2008) indicate that women migrant workers contribute to the development of both sending and receiving countries — remittances from their incomes account for as much as 10 per cent of the GDP (in 2008) in some countries. In 2008, remittances were estimated by the World Bank at US$305 billion (UN Women 2008). These monetary investments — used for food, housing, education and medical services — along with newly acquired skills of returnees, can potentially contribute significantly to poverty reduction.

Gender inequality can be a powerful factor leading to migration when women have economic, political and social expectations that cannot be realized in the country of origin. People in search of better wages and amenities, migrate with accompanying uncertainty and risk, but later ones can come due to personal ties with the former. Social networking, largely female centred, is found to influence migration decisions (Neetha 2004). The pioneer migrants establish live channels of contact and communication with the natives left behind - transmitting knowledge of attractive features and potential places of migration.

While globalization may foster the acceleration of trade and investment, it does not however, always create an environment that protects migrant workers’ economic, social and physical security. This is even more so when it comes to women migrant workers, whose numbers have been increasing, now constituting 50 percent or more of the migrant work force in Asia and Latin America (Dias et al.2001).

While migration can bring new employment and opportunities, it also bears great risks for women, many of whom end up at the lower end of the job market. Female
migrants often work as domestic workers and entertainers — an euphemism for sex workers — in unregulated informal sectors that do not fall under national labour laws. Migrant women routinely lack access to social services and legal protection and are subjected to abuses such as harsh working and living conditions, low wages, illegal withholding of wages and premature termination of employment. Financial exploitation and deliberate misinformation of migrant women workers through illegal recruiters lead not only to economic ruin, but also to physical and sexual abuse of countless women. Studies of entertainers from the Philippines in Japan report not only problems of prostitution, drug abuse but poor working conditions, long working hours and violence in addition to problems of loneliness and linguistic and cultural isolation (Gulati 1997). The plights of these unprotected females are increasingly becoming a source of public concern. Conventions, laws and practices governing the rights of women and migrants in receiving countries affect women migrants. Women who are recruited as domestic workers or those who are unauthorized workers in the country of destination, are particularly vulnerable. Depending on the receiving country, they may have no protection or recourse in case of abuse. Women migrants are also affected by gender inequality in the society of destination. Labour market segmentation based on gender and the segregation of women in traditionally female occupations (nursing, secretarial work, garment industry work, etc.) mean that migrant women are often paid less than migrant men who are concentrated in higher-paying occupations (Phalane 1997, UN 2000).

Section 1.2: 

Involuntary migration

Most women migrants move voluntarily, but women and girls are also forced migrants leaving their countries in order to flee conflict, persecution, environmental degradation, natural disasters (Bogue 1969) or other situations that affect their security, livelihood or habitat (UN 2000). Their status will be different from women who have migrated in search of better prospects in the host country. These women are fighting for survival, for themselves and their families, and are often already disadvantaged due to their subordinate role in society (Hoy 1997). There are countless examples among the Jews of Germany, Japanese of Korea and Taiwan,
Asians from Uganda, Vietnamese from North Vietnam, Tamils from Sri Lanka, and Afghans from Afghanistan (Chakraborty 2004). But for India what probably comes first to the mind is the Partition of India in 1947 and in its aftermath, the huge influx of Hindu refugees, men, women and children from West and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), to India, and Muslims from India to Pakistan.

Refugee women and girls or those who are displaced are particularly vulnerable when they find themselves in situations where their security cannot be ensured, and where they may be subject to various types of violence or exploitation. Providing women and children who are refugees or displaced, access to food and other essential items is critical, as is their participation in decisions regarding their future and that of their families.

In the year 1947, the British decided to leave India but the country was partitioned between two countries primarily on the basis of religion. The Partition of India included the geographical division of the Bengal province of British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal (in India), and the similar partition of the Punjab province of British India into West Punjab (later Punjab in Pakistan and Islamabad capital territory) and Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in India (Chhabra 2006).

The aftermath of this was that 12 million people were displaced and a million died. Families were divided. Properties lost, homes destroyed. The aftermath of this is that seventy five thousand women were said to have been abducted and raped (Butalia 1998). The women were the worst sufferers. The countless rapes and kidnapping of women and young girls is probably among the most sordid tales of the Partition. Females, some with children in their arms were abducted, molested, passed from one man to another, bartered and sold like cattle; women’s bodies historically being territories in which men have acted out their aggression (Samuel et al.2011).

The borders of present-day Bangladesh were established with the Partition of Bengal in 1947, when the region became East Pakistan, a part of the newly formed nation of Pakistan. However, it was separated from the western wing by 1,600 km (994 miles) of Indian Territory. Political and linguistic discrimination as well as economic
neglect led to popular agitations against West Pakistan, which led to the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and the establishment of Bangladesh (Chakraborty 2004).

The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent democratic nation in 1971 did not stem the flow of Hindus to India from Bangladesh where they continued to face multiple ostracities, unabated harassment and political changes, triggering a massive exodus to West Bengal and neighbouring states like Orissa, Assam, Tripura etc. Religious harassments and socio-economic–political pressure, and on the other hand linguistic and cultural similarities and continuous flow of information through initial presence of a large number of migrants from Bangladesh in India also helped (Neetha 2004). Friends and relatives inform new migrants about the local situation and often provided food and shelter initially to them.

Women not only came along with their families but also came singly. Harassed in their motherland, often forsaken by their families and forced to accept the burden of a new refugee life, the women began their grim battle for survival and struggle as wives, mothers and workers. The challenge was so formidable, that the displaced women had to undergo a process of fundamental change in their behavioural pattern, attitude and the mode of their thinking. The present thesis attempts to study the status of these women migrants from Bangladesh.

Section 1.3: Objective and scope of the thesis

The objective of this thesis is to assess the status of women who came from Bangladesh to India (specifically after 1971). What precisely is the status of these women in India: have they managed to secure a better life for themselves and their families? What is their status in home, workplace and society? The thesis addresses these questions based on a primary survey of the women migrants from Bangladesh, in selected areas of West Bengal and Orissa, where the migrants are large in number.

The thesis analyses the various aspects of status like education and employment. The health situation of these women and their bearing on their status is also
explored. Violence which is inexorably related to the status of women at home and outside, has also been examined.

The present work also tries to evaluate what is the exposure to mass media and the participation of the women migrants to different organisations, and its impact on their status. Observations on the migrant women’s participation in decisions taken at home have also been made.

Section 1.4: Arrangement of chapters

- The thesis is divided into twelve chapters of which, the introductory chapter is the first.
- Chapter 2 embarks on a survey of existing literature on the status of women followed by a section on the status of international women migrants.
- Chapter 3 examines the existing data on the pattern of migration from Bangladesh to India at the national, state and district levels. The chapter traces Bangladesh as the principle source of migrants to India. Rural-urban and male-female composition of the migrants and the reasons behind the volume of female migration are also discussed. This is followed by a look into the distribution of migrants from Bangladesh to India in the different States of India with different degrees of concentration. The discussion moves on to district level distribution of migrants from Bangladesh in the two States West Bengal and Orissa, focussing on the selected districts of the two States.
- Chapter 4 begins with a description of the survey areas and households followed by a presentation of the migration details of the women migrants brought under the survey.
- The next four chapters concentrate on the different aspects of the status of women, namely education, health, work and violence. Beginning with education and the status of women, Chapter 5 provides an overview of the education levels of the women migrants at different income levels and the
reasons for discontinuity of education for the women migrants at various stages of education.

• Chapter 6 discusses health, beginning with an outline of the general health of the women migrants from Bangladesh, their diet and meal timings. The chapter then discusses the medical care of the women migrants, their dependency on unscientific medical alternatives like quacks, and who takes various decisions related to the health of the women migrants. An index of decision making regarding health decisions has also been constructed.

• Chapter 7 reviews the situation of the women migrants engaged in employment. In this context, the decision to work and decision to contribute to family fund are also examined, and indices constructed.

• Chapter 8 takes up the issue of violence, physical and mental, faced by the women migrants at home, outside and at work and the various implications on their status.

• The next two Chapters, 9 and 10, scrutinise two more status indicators, namely media and association to organisations. The intervention from family, primarily husbands has also been examined.

• Chapter 11 deals with decision making at the household level and the women’s participation in these decisions.

• Finally, Chapter 12 concludes the study by summarising the main findings of this thesis and the implications of the findings on the status of the women migrants from Bangladesh. This is followed by the Case Studies.