



EMERGING EVIDENCE

How Networks and Institutions Shape the Experiences of Young Migrant Women Living and Working in Hyderabad



AJWS grantee Samvada works with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, through the formation of Youth Resource Centers (YRCs) that support and mobilize young people to build their lives and transform society by challenging patriarchy, feudalism, fundamentalism and all forms of social exclusion. Photo by Sara Hylton. *This photo was not taken as part of the research described in this report.*

BACKGROUND

A rising number of young women have migrated from rural to urban areas of India in recent years, seeking education and employment. Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies launched this study to better understand the conditions these women face in the city of Hyderabad, Telangana.

RESEARCH GOALS

Understand how migration to an urban area of India has shaped young women's sexuality, aspirations, conduct and movement and how they have negotiated challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Primary data collection: 42 in-depth interviews with young women who entered Hyderabad alone (without partner or family)

- All of the women had completed at least 12 years of education and chose to move to the city, rather than being forced by their families or circumstances.

HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

Backgrounds and Aspirations

- Caste, class and family shaped their expectations of and goals for city life, with less affluent young women pursuing low-paid jobs and women from slightly higher income households seeking out higher education or jobs in information technology and private medical care.
- Many saw migration as a way to escape their parent's strict rules regarding mobility and personal freedoms, especially related to sexuality. But young women remained dependent on their families and continued negotiating those relationships after moving away.

Family Acceptance of Young Women's Migration

- Migration had become crucial for most families for education and jobs, and they valued the city's opportunities for upward mobility.
- Families often agreed to the moves only under conditions that they believed would protect young women. For example, they required their daughters to stay with or near extended family or friends in the city or to live in hostels that did not allow male visitors.

Emerging Evidence is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU).

The study summarized here, "Metropolis as Patriarch: A Study of Youth Living and Working in Hyderabad," was carried out by Rani Rohini Raman, Mithun Som and A. Suneetha in 2020.

Networks that Facilitated Women's Moves to the City

- Almost all women from marginalized castes sought help—housing, job leads, etc.—from family, relatives and friends when moving to Hyderabad. But they faced disadvantages because their contacts had access to limited social networks and professions.
- More affluent women also needed help from their networks, but only when their families did not support their moves. They typically asked for information, rather than a place to stay.

Role of Institutions in Women's Experiences of the City

- Most women from marginalized backgrounds worked long hours at shopping malls and hospitals, leaving them little time or resources for leisure. Still, they found the city to be a liberating space with opportunities for small freedoms and improved quality of life—to taste new food, learn new skills and wear clothes that would be disapproved of in villages.
- Affordable public universities gave young women more varied experiences. University hostels expanded their networks and access to information about jobs or further education, and young women joined discussions that expanded their views on gender roles, politics, marriage and careers. But they also faced curfews that only applied to women and restricted their access to libraries, sports facilities and social activities.
- Women who joined corporate workplaces encountered prejudice about what women could or could not do. These offices lacked mechanisms to address discrimination or sexual harassment, and migrant women felt left out of post-work social activities because they were unlike other working women (regionalism in offices, or caste, religion, or language-based cliques). Young women who took maternity leave found that their careers stagnated.
- Working women who lived in hostels or other shared residences found their movements and activities were closely surveilled by owners, managers, other residents and neighbors. This led the women to conduct themselves less freely. The people monitoring them did little or nothing to support their wellbeing.
- In hostels and universities, there is little access to health services and seeking health services is looked upon with suspicion (such as immediate assumptions of pregnancy and increased surveillance as a result).

Transformations Resulting from City Life

- Without exception, young women reported major changes in their friendships (therefore an expanded network and support structures), clothing choices, language skills, diet and sense of mobility. Their ideas and opinions about themselves, their families, marriage and relationships, and the world at large also shifted after they moved to the city.
- Many kinds of people catalyzed these changes, including teachers, administrators, colleagues, bosses, friends, hostel mates and romantic partners.
- Women said they had to carefully negotiate increased autonomy when it came to marriage. For example, young women sometimes gained the ability to choose their partners or delay marriage by helping their families financially or arranging their younger siblings' education. While they may not have full autonomy over who they marry and their families continue to dictate this, they could negotiate for certain criteria. For example, some women were able to demand that they would only marry into a household where they would not be expected to give up their job.

CONCLUSION

Men and women navigate starkly different social situations in modern Indian cities. Young migrant women's opportunities and experiences of city life are mediated not only by their families and their caste, class or regional backgrounds, but by the institutions in their lives: their workplaces, schools and temporary homes within the city. While young women often migrate seeking greater autonomy and freedom from their families' strict rules, these institutions continue to restrict women's mobility and sexuality through gender-specific curfews, close surveillance of their behavior and other formal and informal rules for what young women can and cannot do. These institutions are themselves patriarchal and also see themselves as "protectors" of women in a way that they then are discriminatory and not liberating. To enable women to have greater access to freedoms, the deep-seated patriarchies within the institutions of urban life whether the colleges or workplaces, need to be addressed/ challenged. Still, women's perspectives are expanded through this engagement, and the experience is transformative at the individual level. It does empower them in multiple ways, although some domains (such as marriage) remain challenging.

Published February 2021

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