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FEMINIST FRONTIERS

Where is my home?: Gendered precarity and the experience of COVID-19 among women migrant workers from Delhi and National Capital Region, India

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Abstract

With growing interest in the lives of individuals and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is consensus among scholars, academicians, and policy makers that the pandemic has had unequal impacts on different sections of the society. The dominant idea that "we are in this together" needs to be critically unpacked to understand the differential impact of the same pandemic on people with varied vulnerabilities. The concept of "intersectional vulnerability" has been key to understanding the unequal distribution of the pandemic risk. Using a gendered intersectional lens, this paper aims to understand the lived experiences of migrant women workers during the pandemic and their narratives of gendered inequality. Through a narrative study in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), India, from May to October 2020, this study brings out stories of precarity faced by five migrant women while battling the social, psychological, and economic effects of the pandemic. Loss of livelihood, home, savings, and prospects of a better future shape the narratives of these women. The pandemic exacerbated the already precarious positions of these women by creating a situation where—(a) patriarchal structures were further reinforced, and (b) losing gender solidarity and companionship through lockdown and social distancing.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." –Arundhati Roy (2020)

Where is my home? The questioning title of this paper is an evocative call to privilege the voices and narratives of marginalized migrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of whom walked several hundred kilometers from urban cities to their rural hometown in search of a temporary place to live. The "Home" here represents both, a site of agency, as well as vulnerability for women migrants who experienced a deep sense of loss as a result of the pandemic. This uncertainty of this pandemic world (Roy, 2020) with its changing precarity has created a new social and economic order, one that has modified the relationships between individuals and communities. Through a narrative study (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008), we aim to understand how migrant women workers experience these changing relationships, gendered precarity, and the challenges of the pandemic. Using a gendered intersectional lens, the paper brings out narratives of five women migrant workers from Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR), India.

Studies in the past have well documented the economically marginalized and neglected lives of migrant laborers in Delhi, who work under the challenges of low incomes and wages, without job safety, medical health, and social security provisions (Bora, 2014; Hayami et al., 2006; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Mezzadri, 2008; Neetha, 2004). Migrant workers move from rural to urban cities like Delhi in search of jobs but most of them get employed in temporary (on contract) work and lead a low quality life (Mitra, 2010). Majority of migrant laborers are concentrated in labor intensive, casual, and informal sector jobs like brick kilns, quarries, construction sites, and manufacturing plants across India (Bhattacharyya & Korinek, 2007). According to Premi (1980), in the 1980s, marriage and associational migration (desertion, widowhood, destitution, and broken marriages) were important contributors to internal migration among women. More recently, economically motivated migrations among women have become common (Deshingkar & Start, 2003), however, they continue to migrate with their spouses, thus reporting themselves as tied movers (Bhattacharyya & Korinek, 2007). According to Saraswati et al. (2015) and Lahiri (2017), majority women migrants find employment in domestic household work, many others get employed in tailoring and handicraft and then some in factory and construction work. They usually live in urban slums (Chimankar, 2016; Mitra, 2010; Mohapatra, 2012) and many of them belong to lower caste backgrounds (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007; Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, India went into a complete lockdown on March 25, 2020. As a result of the lockdown, migrant workers like those employed as domestic helps, construction laborers, among others were forced into an indefinite nonpaid leave or asked to leave with one month's wage (Mahapatra, 2020). The lockdown became a 40-day-battle with hunger, joblessness, deplorable living conditions, and a forced separation from family. Many families were put up in hostile camps during the lockdown and had no way of reaching their families back home in their villages (Pandey, 2020). This loss of livelihood at a time when the pandemic could create extra pressures on health or health associated expenditure "broke the back" of the already vulnerable migrant workers (Jebaraj, 2020). While there have been studies done to understand the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chakraborty, 2020; Islam, 2020), we specifically turn our attention to the migrant women workers for they were extremely vulnerable even before the pandemic. We use the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as an approach to understand gendered vulnerability and situate the pandemic experiences of migrant women within the larger literature on precarity.

2 | GENDERED PRECARITY

"If we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlement to persistence and flourishing, we will have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily belonging, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging" (Butler, 2009, p. 2).

The etymology of the term precarious comes from the Latin term prex which means pray but is also connected to the word "uncertain." This word has assumed new meanings in the age of global capitalism and neoliberalization. According to the International Labour Organization (2011), precarious work typically involves low wages, short fixed-term contracts, numerous intermediaries such as recruitment agencies and subcontractors, and poor legal and social protections. The term evokes an image of "lives that are dispensable, evictable and deportable, and the abandoning of individuals to naked forces of the market" (Ferrarese, 2017, p. 1). Likewise, scholars such as Standing (2011), Jørgensen (2016), and Schierup et al., (2015) classify migrant workers as one of the most important groups making up the precariat class. Lewis et al., (2015), observe that migrant workers lead "hyper-precarious" lives, where they face multiple social vulnerabilities (Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Through this paper, we specifically focus on the conditions and experiences of precariat migrant workers, borrowing from theorists and social scientists like Standing (2011) and Rigg (2015).

To strengthen this argument on vulnerability and precarity, we also borrow from Hannah Arendt's conceptions of "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1964) to stress upon the idea that rampant economic violations of migrant workers have been normalized over a period of time and that the privileged classes in India have become desensitized to these pervasive precarities of the migrant workers as they are considered "banal" and "everyday" (Arendt, 2006). At the same time, Butler's (2009) distinction between precarious and precarity is useful to our study of women migrant workers. Butler (2004) looks at precarity as a "politically induced condition, in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). Precarity, according to her, is unequally distributed in society and is experienced by marginalized and poor people who are exposed to economic insecurity, violence, and forced migration. This inequality makes some lives and bodies more "disposable" while making others more "protected." Differential social value and importance is accorded to different people depending on their position within late capitalism. Government, Media, and accumulation of capital help make this distinction between those lives that are more "grievable" than others. Therefore, precarity is the particular vulnerability imposed on the "disposable" or the disenfranchised, and those endangered by wars or pandemics. Precariousness, on the other hand, is the inherent state of vulnerability and interdependence by which human life can be understood from a collective, communal point of view.

Another perspective on precarity and vulnerability developed by V. Das (1995) through ethnographic studies on mass violence and rapes in India after the partition, looks at how "the distribution of violence, torture and massacres can haunt and shape everyday relations." She explains how certain forms of life and are also forms of violent death "in which a form of death is born in the matrix of everyday life." Examining ways in which precarity is created and how it is lived allows us to understand vulnerable circumstances and how individuals and communities experience and cope with them. Critical migration scholars have also contributed to the idea of vulnerability by building upon Agamben's (2020) conception of "vita nuda" or "bare life" to understand the experiences of refugees and migrants within a global economy. The concept of "vita nuda" equates humans to animals by implying that some people have no rights and no political participation and live a bare life, not different from those of animals.

Intersectionality brings forth the pandemic experiences of different women, which prevents generalizing and resists essentializing any category and their experiences (Hankivsky et al., 2010). It effectively helps prevent the treatment of all women and their pandemic experiences as the same. Using a gender intersectionality lens allows us to understand that migrant women face a heightened amount of risk and vulnerability, given their precariat position even before the pandemic. Their temporary jobs within a highly capital driven economy makes their lives more

"disposable" than other women, especially during a pandemic. Disaster studies have engaged with the concept of "vulnerability" for close to 4 decades now and it has gained importance in understanding experiences of people and communities with respect to disasters (Arora, 2020b). The concept of social vulnerability supports that while the COVID-19 infection exists in the environment, for it to become a disaster it needs to affect vulnerable populations. Therefore, the pre-existing social systems are to be blamed as they generate "unequal exposure to risk, making some groups of people, some individuals, and some societies more prone to hazards" (Bankoff, 2003, p. 6).

Studies in the past have explored the significance of gender in understanding social processes during hazard events (Arora, 2018; Enarson et al., 2018). Many studies on gender and disasters have maintained that social norms, practices, and traditions make women more vulnerable in the face of hazards (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Fordham, 2003; Nelson et al., 2002; Sultana, 2010). Disasters (or the pandemic) tend to impact women more due to their marginalized positions within a patriarchal society and when their gender identity intersects with their class and caste locations, a gender-class-caste complex is created which positions them as extremely vulnerable (Arora, 2020b). Women migrant workers, therefore, were hugely impacted by COVID-19 and through this paper, we try to unpack and understand their lived experiences of the pandemic.

3 | WALKING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

"The stones were sharp, The wind came at my back; Walking along the highway, Mincing like a cat."
- Theodore Roethke (Roethke & Hirsch, 2005)

The COVID-19 lockdown in India was seen as one of the strictest in the world, where people from all across India were forced to stay inside their homes for 40 continuous days (Choudhury, 2020). As soon as, what was termed as lockdown 2.0 ended on May 3, 2020, there was some relaxation on movement of people and that is when areas around Delhi and NCR saw a huge number of migrant workers on the streets and highways, making their journey back home. Thousands of migrant laborers walking bare feet, without water and food, holding their belongings in a small bag became the most recognizable visual of what was termed as the migrant crisis (Bapuji et al., 2020; R. Das & Kumar, 2020; Ghosh, 2020; Srivastava, 2020). These migrant workers had suffered income losses during the lockdown and could no longer afford the rent for their rooms or place of dwelling, which pushed them to find their way back home to their villages (Nayar, 2020; Ray & Subramanian, 2020; Sengupta & Jha, 2020). Indian poet Gulzar (2020) compared this migrant crisis to that of partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 in the following lines

"I had seen similar caravans in '47 too
They are fleeing to their villages in their own country
We had fled from our village setting out for our country
Calling us refugees, our country had kept us"

We first became interested in this study when we saw gut-wrenching newspaper visuals of a child trying to wake up his dead mother (a migrant worker) at Muzaffarpur station in Bihar (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020), and an equally disturbing news video of a migrant woman dragging her sleeping child on a suitcase while walking through the city of Agra in Uttar Pradesh (A. Chauhan, 2020). These visuals left an indelible memory for us and motivated us to do this study. We started our fieldwork in May after the initial easing of the lockdown, and began to observe migrant women workers walking on National Highway (NH) 48 that connects Delhi to major cities like Gurgaon, Jaipur, Ajmer, Udaipur, Ahmedabad, and numerous villages in between. Figure 1 below shows the different cities connected by NH- 48.
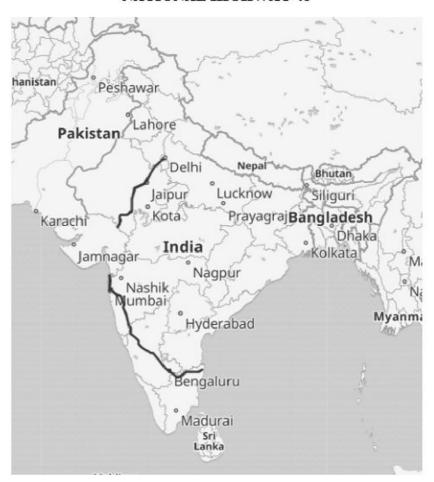
NATIONAL HIGHWAY 48

FIGURE 1 Map of India showing National Highway 48 (OpenStreetMap®, 2020)

Migrant women were on average walking about 35–40 kilometers daily in scorching heat, sometimes also carrying a young child in their arms. Other migrants who chose to stay behind in Delhi/NCR struggled with getting back to work and many moved into temporary camps (Bailwal & Sah, 2020). Through narrative interviews, we captured the experiences of five such migrant women, two of whom had walked home and back to Delhi and three others who had stayed in Delhi/NCR even after the lockdown had ended. Table 1 highlights some important demographic details for our participants.

Using narrative epistemology, we posit that people have storied lives and that knowledge is not "found" but constructed by the participants through their stories and anecdotes. Here, we use the term stories and narratives interchangeably and concentrate on the stories that highlight their experience of living through the pandemic. We borrow from other studies that look at women's personal narratives (V. Das, 1991; Mukherjee, 2016; Stanley, 1995) to better inform our approach. As migrant women turn into storytellers, the stories that these participants choose to tell, in what manner and with what emotions, indirectly signal the meaning they would like the listener to take away from the story. The heroes, villains, major plotlines, and narrative arcs become important knowledge(s) for the storyteller to tell and for the listener to listen (Arora, 2020a).

The researchers took time and effort to develop rapport with the participants and to garner their trust. Once a participant felt comfortable about being included in the research, free flowing narrative interviews were conducted mostly sitting in open areas like parks, footpaths, pavements, or on sides of a road. These interviews were conducted in Hindi and were voice recorded, which were later transcribed and translated into English. Some running notes were also made while the interview was being conducted where nonverbal cues and some probe areas were recorded. Thematic exploration was done by employing open, axial, and selective coding. To do this, we read through the narratives several times to create tentative labels to summarize the narratives. We then proceeded by identifying relationships between the open codes and lastly we identified core themes that included all of the data and re-read the data to selectively code it according to core themes identified. This coding process fits with Riessman's (2008) thematic analysis of narratives. According to her, a thematic analysis would primarily be interested in what topically and thematically surfaces in the realm of a story's content. Using thematic approach, we identified two major themes and many subthemes within each of them. Table 2 discusses the themes and subthemes that emerged.

An important starting point for this research was to question the inherent power dynamics that nuance this research. The study acknowledges that there are power asymmetries that would prevent minority women from discussing the challenges they face within their immediate structures like home or workplace. For this reason, extensive efforts were made to help participants become comfortable to narrate their life story, critical events, and personal situations at their own pace and convenience. At the same time, they were assured that their voices would be maintained and their identity would be secured. For this reason, pseudonyms have been used in this study. This allowed participants to open up with the researchers as they became less hesitant in discussing sensitive issues pertaining to their experience with respect to the pandemic. Before each interview, informed consent was received from each of the participants and permissions were taken for keeping the recordings. The research adhered to all the ethical guidelines laid down by the academic institutions that the researchers were associated with while this research was conducted. The researchers also made efforts to self-reflect and decode their own positionality. As feminist researchers invested in gender and subaltern research, we reflected on our own biases and prejudices and

T A B L E 1 Demographic break-up of participants

Participant pseudonym	Occupation	Age	Home town	Approximate distance from Delhi (in kilometers)
Sarita	Domestic help	26	Karaundi, Faizabad district	126
Anu	Construction worker	22	Jalesar, Etah district	188
Seema	Vegetable vendor	34	Kheri gaon, Girwa	639
Ritu	Works as a cleaner at a beauty parlor	32	Bichpuri, Tonk district	200
Deepa	Tailoring work	20	Jiwajipur, Vidisha	653

T A B L E 2 Initial codes and final themes

Initial codes	Final themes
• Extra caregiving responsibilities on women • Loss of decision making and increased restrictions • The gendered experiences of the lockdown and "walking back home"	Reinforcing patriarchy
• Experiences of social distancing • Class divide and intersectional experiences • Friendships and resilience	Gender solidarities and friendships

maintained a reflexive journal that would help ground us and prioritize the voice of the participant rather than our own interpretation of it. In the next section of this paper, we discuss some of the broad narrative themes that emerged within the stories of migrant women.

4 | REINFORCING PATRIARCHY

"Daulat ki seva karte hain thukrae hue ham daulat ke, Mazdur hain hum, mazdoor hain hum sautele bete qismat ke"

Trans: (We work for the rich and are kept away from money, We are labourers, we are labourers, we are abandoned step-sons of good fortune) -Jameel Mazhari (Nick, 2020).

Research studies on gender and disasters engage in two very opposing arguments. One stream of thought looks at disasters as a "rupture" or a break in the ordinary that may have the potential of unsettling an already established status quo including gender relations, therefore providing an opportunity to challenge patriarchal structures (Arora, 2018; Moreno & Shaw, 2018). On the other hand, many social scientists (Hines, 2007; Kinnvall & Rydstrom, 2019; Luft, 2016) have strongly argued how disasters as events tend to have an opposite effect of reinforcing patriarchy by expecting women to revert to traditional gender roles of caregiving and familial duties. Keeping these two divergent epistemic premises in mind, we explored lived experiences of migrant women not knowing if the pandemic provided them with agentic opportunities and/or created further vulnerabilities.

The lockdown and the subsequent social distancing norms that came into effect due to the COVID-19 pandemic, made many migrant women jobless. This had a severe and direct impact on their economic, social, and psychological wellbeing. Many women expressed the debilitating and the "irreversible" changes that the pandemic has caused.

"We may survive the corona virus but we will certainly die of hunger"
(Sarita, interview date: May 4, 2020)

The loss of economic stability and the freedom to move outside home to work had larger gendered implications. The loss of livelihood translated into a sense of loss of decision making and mobility. Women narrated how they felt more restricted and confined with the loss of job and income.

"Earning money gives us confidence, we get respect from our husband and in-laws as we bring in food. The pandemic took away that sense.... the ability to move outside the house freely and make decisions independently" (Seema, interview date: August 20, 2020)

As explained by the participants, the ability to contribute to the household income (however little it may be), gives them some social sanctions like being outside of homes for long hours, making decisions about how to spend some of their savings, and in some cases even distributing the household chores among other family members. The feeling of independence is also created through establishing a nuclear family set-up in cities, as opposed to a patrilocal, joint family set-up back in their villages. The expenses of city life with limited housing facilities prevents migrant workers from bringing their parents or other family members to the city to live with them. This frees up migrant women from providing care giving to the elderly and being constrained by the ideologies and expectations of the joint family members. With the economic constraints put by the pandemic and migrants having to return to their villages, women dreaded going back to the extra caregiving workload that would fall on them, which is invisibilized work with no monetary value.

"My mother-in-law got a fever (implied to Covid-19 positive)..... Everyone expected me to take care of her and yes, I did it for almost a month....nursed her back to health. It took a toll on me, I also got a fever and felt weak for about 3-4 days. Nobody pays you for doing this but it is hard work" (Ritu, interview date: June 14, 2020)

The pandemic brought on more gendered responsibilities on women with them having to take care of COVID-19-affected family members and tending to their needs. Women were expected to revert to traditional gender roles and be a "good mother," "good daughter," or a "good wife." Patriarchal expectations compounded with economic insecurity and homelessness made it extra challenging for women. The journey back to their villages was not necessarily a journey back home. These women suffered a great sense of loss of agency and felt that their lives had regressed in many ways due to the pandemic. During the 40-day lockdown, many migrants faced food shortages. As resources dried up, some people also violated the lockdown at the risk of being fined or arrested.

"I work as a maid and didi (the employer) did not give me any advance when the lockdown was announced. She said that she had suffered a pay cut and cannot give me any extra money. We are poor people with no savings... we ran out of money and food after a few days of lockdown. It was a nightmare.....so I had to move out to find food or we would have died of hunger." (Sarita, interview date: July 18, 2020)

During the lockdown, instances of domestic violence and abuse also increased (M. Das et al., 2020). According to the participants, the frustration of being confined in close spaces for long hours with the entire family compounded with the helplessness of not being able to live up to the masculine notion of "providing for the family" caused extreme tension and violent outbursts among men.

"There was high stress and my husband would get angry on small issues. He would constantly abuse me and say that we are cursed. Earlier (before the lockdown), we would be busy working the whole day and would see each other only at night.... we would hardly get time to talk, leave alone fight....The fights and the abuses increased after the lockdown" (Anu, interview date: July 20, 2020)

Those women who walked to their villages expressed that the journey was an ordeal. They were hungry, thirsty, and tired of walking in the summer heat and rarely had time to relax or take a break. They would sleep on the sides of the road at night without proper bedding or shelter and go on for sometimes a week with limited food, water, and toilet facilities on the highways. Women were mostly responsible for young children, carrying them in their arms and tending to them.

"When you are walking for 7-8 days, you have to use the toilet... but we all know that there are very few toilets on our highways and those that are there are always locked. We are used to it. I would usually go out in the open in the morning hours and then drink less water during the day so that I wouldn't have the urge to do it. Although, walking the whole day in scorching sun would leave me parched and dehydrated" (Deepa, interview date: October 26, 2020)

This need to keep oneself thirsty and monitor water intake because of lack of proper toilets and other infrastructure (Datta & Ahmed, 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2015) is a form of bodily violence (Harcourt & Escobar, 2002; Phadke, 2013; Phadke et al., 2011) that women take on themselves. This violence is gendered and there is a constant negotiation between the physiological need of thirst and the social control of women and their bodies, which makes this walk even more challenging for women. The lack of toilets on

highways is a structural exclusion of women from the state's imagination and amplifies the impact of walking hundreds of kilometers on foot. For these women, the journey back to their villages indicated a portal into their past. They explained how they had left their villages because of lack of employment opportunities and had come to Delhi/NCR in search of a better life for themselves and their next generation. While most migrant workers are unable to afford a proper and secure rented housing arrangement and end up living on the streets, the city still signifies a space of possibilities. The village, on the other hand, marks the end of their dream of social mobility. It is unable to provide them with anonymity of identity and freedom of work and most importantly, hope for a better future. So the village is not a "home," it is a place where "future is put on hold" till they can figure out a way to get back to the city.

> "Suppose you migrate to a foreign country (addressing the researcher) in search of a better life and job, get married and settled there and have children. How would you feel if you had to suddenly leave everything there and come back because you lost your job and don't have any money? It is the same for us" (Deepa, interview date: October 26, 2020)

> "City life is tough, it is full of struggle but going back means that all that struggle was for nothing. Our years here and all the hard work meant nothing.….My gaon(village) is not my home…back in the village everyone knows me and I will have to stay with my in-laws, follow all the traditions and will have no scope for employment" (Seema, interview date: August 20, 2020)

These migrant women experienced a sense of "homelessness" even though some of them had a place of dwelling in their villages. Women expressed this to be their greatest sense of loss during the pandemic.

5 | GENDER SOLIDARITIES AND FRIENDSHIPS

After the lockdown, while some migrants moved toward their villages, others tried to get back their old jobs or find some new employment opportunities. With social distancing norms in place and strict protocols on movement, jobs were difficult to come by (Bhatt et al., 2020; P. Chauhan, 2020; Gill, 2020). Participant narratives were full of their experiences of social distancing. As for many, this was a new and highly difficult concept to internalize. As migrant women, they had all faced one or the other form of social exclusion and stigma because of their class and/or caste identity but "social distancing" protocols exacerbated the prejudicial attitude toward them. Sarita, a domestic help, narrated how she was treated in one of the residential buildings where she worked.

> "In the building where I work, there is a separate lift for maids and drivers. We cannot take the same lift as the residents of the building. This is normal for us but we noticed that people (referring to their employers) thought that poor people like us spread the disease. We maids would have to wear gloves, masks and sometimes a PPE kit given by the employer. It felt so much like untouchability (reference to the discriminating casteist attitude)" (Sarita, interview date: July 18, 2020)

The experience of social distancing for migrant women was quite humiliating and devoid of empathy. The privileged sections of the society and their employers looked at them as carriers of the virus and used social distancing as an excuse to mistreat them. The pandemic, therefore, highlighted the class and caste divide in the Indian society. At the same time, migrant women do jobs that cannot be done online or through computers and therefore, their physical presence at the job site was an essential component of their work.

> "It would be nice if I could sweep the floors of the beauty parlour through a computer, just as women like you (referring to the researcher) have the luxury of doing your job from your computer, sitting at home." (Ritu, interview date: July 10, 2020)

Women employed in formal were majorly better off when compared to migrant women. Many upper class women were able to continue work online and had savings to help them get through a few months even if they were laid off or received pay cuts. This indicates how the experiences of precarity and vulnerability due to the COVID-19 pandemic are intersectional.

Solidarity as a concept provides an interesting frame to understand gendered precarity among migrant workers. Solidarity is a form of identification and as such is both inclusive and exclusionary. Solidarity depends on a definition of "us" distinct from "them" (Morgan & Pulignano, 2020; Prasad & Zulfiqar, 2020). In the narratives of migrant women, we notice that the concept of "us" as lower class workers vis-a-vis the "employer" became stark and noticeable. So while there have been gendered experiences of the pandemic, not all women are equally precarious and have varying degrees of vulnerability depending on their class, caste, and social positioning.

Participants also explained how the pandemic impacted their social life, especially friendships and camaraderie. Due to the lockdown and the subsequent social distancing norms, women missed and in some cases lost their social support groups and friends. Participants talked at length about how they missed the time spent with friends, and reverse migration among the migrant community had led to a feeling of isolation among them.

> "We both work as domestic help in the same building and also live nearby.... I have known her for about 8 years now. Our children play together....we share food, celebrate festivals together...because of the pandemic we both lost our jobs and her family decided to move back to their village. I miss her everyday, she understood me better than my family" (Sarita, interview date: July 18, 2020)

Migrants who migrated back to their villages, lost a sense of community and belonging. According to the participants, their neighbors, their gali (street), their children's friends, coworkers, employers, and the familiarity of the city life that they had built for themselves had all vanished within a matter of days. The role of friendships is often not given enough importance when discussing migrant women as it is widely assumed that women rely on familial support within domestic settings (Ryan, 2007). This underestimates the significance of friendship between women as a source of both emotional and practical support (Ryan, 2007).

> "Friends are a source of strength and comfort in the bleakness of Covid-19. When my friend got the infection, we all took care of getting her food and supplies" (Seema, interview date: August 20, 2020)

Friendships and solidarity is essential to the vulnerability and precarity debate. The loss of friendship is a loss of social networks and therefore increases vulnerability among women. The erosion of emotional and practical support at a time of an unprecedented pandemic became a stressor for women. On the flip side, for *Seema* (participant), her friend *Radha* was one of the main reasons why her family did not go back to their village.

> "Radha convinced her husband to talk to mine about staying back in the city. Her husband lent us some money and Radha was always motivating us and telling us to have faith. I don't know what I had done without her" (Seema, interview date: August 20, 2020)

Stories of how migrant women showed resilience through forging solidarities and with the help of friendships were quite prominent. Friendships gave them confidence and helped build hope for the future.

6 | DISCUSSION

The social-vulnerability tradition has theorized about the unequal and disproportionate effects of disasters on different sections of the society depending upon their social position and vulnerability within society. In this paper, we explore the experiences of precarity, wounding, and pain among migrant women in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, we explore possibilities of solidarity and resilience among them. The stories narrated to us were not just stories of women but those of lower class, lower caste, migrant women who had lost their homes and jobs within days. Their class and caste locations compounded the effects of the pandemic for them and their lived experiences reflected a feeling of exclusion and marginalization.

The lockdown and the subsequent migrant crisis reinforced gender inequalities and patriarchy as women hold more vulnerable jobs and are exposed to health risks. Other social and identity (caste, class) inequalities intersect with gender identities to create further risks. Intersectionality helps appreciate the lived experiences of individuals as shaped by class, caste, and gender positions but at the same time, the stories reveal that class and caste seem to dilute gender solidarities in many ways. The upper class, upper caste women employers were not empathetic toward migrant women and failed to provide support to them during the pandemic. Stories also narrate how social distancing norms were used against migrant women in a humiliating and derogatory manner. Social distancing in many ways reinforced casteist ideas of pollution and gave the upper class, upper caste (including women) an excuse to discriminate against migrant women.

Another striking feature of the narratives from this study is that many stories of resilience and solidarity came from same gender friendships. Migrant women found a sense of support, comfort and confidence in their friendships with other migrant women. These friendships provided them with social, psychological support which helped them build resilience and bounce back from the precarity faced by them due to the pandemic. Those who lacked these friendships lost a sense of belonging and future.

Through documenting these narratives, we have been able to bring out the precarious nature of work done by migrant women in a neoliberal economy and the everyday vulnerabilities faced by them. The title of this paper is inspired from an Iranian film by Abbas Kiarostami titled "Where is the Friends home?"(1987). The film is a story of a conscientious young boy trying to return a book to his friend. While seemingly simple as a story, the film is seen as a metaphor for everyday heroism and struggles. Similarly, for migrants across the world, the search for a home is a search for a sense of security, stability, and protection, which is a daily fight and an everyday struggle.

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