

Inclusive Migration Governance and Migrant Vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Madhu Kumari¹ Hemlata Manglani², Chinmoy Sarma³

¹Research Scholar, Department of Economics, Central University of Rajasthan, NH-8, Bandar Sindri, Kishangarh, Ajmer-305817, Rajasthan, India

Email: kumarimadhu789xyz@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0628-0413>

²Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Central University of Rajasthan, NH-8, Bandar Sindri, Kishangarh, Ajmer-305817, Rajasthan, India

Email: hemamanglani@curaj.ac.in

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1771-649X>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=q4pjCVsAAAAJ&hl=en>

Institutional Profile: <https://www.curaj.ac.in/faculty/hemlata-manglani>

³ Master's Student, Department of Economics, Central University of Rajasthan, NH-8, Bandar Sindri, Kishangarh, Ajmer-305817, Rajasthan, India

Email: sarmachinmoy8772@gmail.com

Corresponding Author

Hemlata Manglani

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed profound structural vulnerabilities among migrant workers globally, particularly those engaged in informal and precarious employment. Lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and economic disruptions intensified pre-existing inequalities, highlighting critical gaps in migration governance systems. Despite a growing body of literature, limited attention has been paid to integrating governance frameworks with crisis-responsive mechanisms, especially in developing economies such as India. This study examines the role of migration governance in shaping migrant vulnerabilities during the pandemic through a comprehensive global literature review, with specific reference to India. The study employs a thematic synthesis approach to analyse governance structures and policy responses, drawing on peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and institutional publications from organisations such as the International Labour Organisation and the International Organisation for Migration. The findings reveal significant governance gaps, including fragmented policy frameworks, limited portability of social protection, and weak institutional coordination, which exacerbated migrant precarity during the crisis. In response, the paper proposes an inclusive migration governance framework emphasising labour rights protection, social protection portability, and crisis-responsive institutional mechanisms. The study contributes to the discourse on migrant-inclusive development and offers policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening migration governance in India and other developing economies..

Keywords: COVID-19, informal employment, labour migration, migrant workers, migration governance, public policy, social protection

INTRODUCTION:

International migration is currently one of the most defining attributes of modern globalisation, shaping labour markets, population composition, and economic development trends across nations. The rise of labour mobility has established intricate migration regimes, requiring coordinated mechanisms to govern the migration process at the national, regional, and global levels. Migration workers are also an asset to host economies, as they can fill labour gaps, sustain production systems, and maintain economic activity across sectors (Castles et al., 2014; Ruhs, 2013). Simultaneously, migration plays a significant role in development processes in both the countries where it takes place and

those where migrant workers send remittances, transfer skills, and diversify household income (Clemens, 2011; Massey et al., 1993). The consequence is that migration is now being interpreted more as a demographic process and as a key part of the global labour market and global development.

Although migrant workers contribute to the economies of their countries of origin and destination, they are usually disadvantaged by structural issues in their labour markets and governance structures. The migrants are also clustered in low-skilled and informal industries that feature precarious jobs, low wages, and limited labour protections (Anderson, 2010; Standing, 2011). Access to social protection systems, medical attention, and safe housing is often limited by structural inequalities in labour markets

(Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Piper, 2008). Legal status restrictions, language barrier, and discrimination are yet another factor contributing to these vulnerabilities, as they deny migrants the opportunity to utilise institutional support mechanisms (Triandafyllidou, 2018). This has led to an intensified focus among scholars on the need to adopt inclusive migration governance structures that incorporate labour protection, social welfare, and human rights into migration policy (Betts, 2011; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010).

The overall concept of migration governance comprises the policies, institutional structures, and regulatory frameworks that shape migration flows and migrant welfare. Over the years, migration governance in most nations has been concentrated on border control and labour-market regulation, rather than on protecting and integrating migrants (de Haas et al., 2018). Consequently, the governance structures of migration are commonly discrepant, and the organisation and integration of labour market institutions, social protection structures, and migration policies are poorly coordinated (Betts, 2011). The significance of this fragmentation is relevant to migrant well-being, especially during economic or humanitarian crises, when institutional responses are paramount for safeguarding vulnerable groups.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 showed that the international migration policy and governance framework is weak, and the situation of migrant populations around the world is exacerbated. Governments were able to contain the coronavirus by imposing quarantine, closing borders, and imposing travel restrictions. This was important for making the public health case, but it resulted in an unprecedented impact on the migrant workforce, which lacked emergency safety nets. Migrants employed in the construction industry, household services, hospitality industry, and agriculture were hit hard by massive unemployment and job losses due to reduced or no economic activities during lockdowns (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020; Fasani & Mazza, 2020). Several countries show that migrants were more prone than native employees to lose their jobs, face pay cuts, and experience job insecurity during the pandemic, due to their concentration in informal and precarious jobs (Guadagno, 2020; Martin, 2020). Besides labour market disruptions, the pandemic also highlighted severe shortcomings in migrants' access to healthcare and social protection systems. The necessary actions in public health included access to testing and treatment, and vaccination, which had to be universal, whereas a significant portion of migrants encountered legal, administrative, and institutional barriers (Gentilini et al., 2020). These difficulties underscore the need for inclusive governance structures that ensure migrants are not left out of emergency welfare programs during crises. Researchers consequently explain that the migration governance needs to integrate rights-based strategies that emphasise migrant inclusion in labour, healthcare, and social protection policies (Betts & Collier, 2017).

Recent global evaluations further underscore the increased magnitude and significance of migration in the modern world. The World Migration Report 2024 by the International Organisation for Migration estimates that, as

of 2020, there were about 281 million international migrants worldwide (3.6 per cent of the total population), and that 169 million migrants were involved in global labour markets. Migration has also become a major driving force in the global economy, with remittance flows totalling about USD 831 billion as of 2022, of which much of that money goes to low- and middle-income countries (IMO, 2024).

According to recent policy analyses, migration flows have begun to pick up rapidly following the pandemic and its disruptions. According to the International Migration Outlook 2025 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, migration into OECD countries has been high in the past, and about 6.2 million new permanent immigrants were recorded in 2024. These trends indicate that international migration has been sharply reversing in the post-pandemic era, which is why the role of effective governance systems that can regulate migration flows and safeguard the welfare of migrants remains critical (OECD, 2025).

Meanwhile, recent labour market evaluations focus on the persistence of structural inequality against migrant workers. Research carried out by the International Labour Organisation suggests that migrant workers still face serious challenges in accessing labour laws, social protection networks, and welfare programmes, especially in sectors characterised by temporary contracts, subcontracting, and informal employment (ILO, 2023). On the same note, the United Nations Network on Migration policy guidance points out that effective migration governance should focus on decent working conditions, the protection of human rights, and access to health and social protection to minimise migrants' vulnerability and enhance resilience in the face of crises.

These issues were especially apparent in developing nations, where national labour markets are largely composed of internal migration. Migrant workers constitute a major portion of the urban workforce in India and play a significant role in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and services (Srivastava, 2011). Nonetheless, internal migrants usually have no formal employment agreements, social security, or access to welfare in destination countries (Keshri & Bhagat, 2013). The lockdown that was implemented nationwide in March 2020 triggered a massive humanitarian crisis because millions of migrant workers were suddenly jobless and had to go back to their home regions in extremely challenging conditions (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020). This mass-scale migration revealed gaps in labour protection frameworks and a deficit in social protection mechanisms that could be portable to migrant workers in India (Kesar et al., 2021).

Although the literature on migrant experiences throughout the pandemic is expanding, current research in the field tends to focus on labour-market or humanitarian implications of migration. In comparison with other studies relating migration governance frameworks to the examination of migrant vulnerabilities, relatively fewer studies address the issue of migration governance concerning crises in the world. This gap needs to be addressed to develop policy frameworks better positioned

to safeguard the migrant population in the event of future emergencies.

In this context, this paper conducts a literature review across the world to explore the nexus between migration governance and migrant vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the study will: (1) examine the global migration governance frameworks in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, (2) analyse the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant populations, (3) review the policy responses by governments and international institutions, and (4) draw lessons on the Indian migration crisis to identify the policy challenges and opportunities and build more inclusive migration governance frameworks.

The study is a synthesis of the existing literature on migration, labour economics, and governance, and makes a contribution to future debates on how migration governance systems can be strengthened to better protect migrant populations during future global crises.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Migration Governance

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Migration governance research has shifted from traditional migration theories to a comprehensive approach that considers how institutions, policies, and migrants interact with one another. Migration governance is defined as the hierarchical process whereby governments, international organisations, and other non-state actors exert control over the flow of migration and mobility regimes (Betts, 2011; Geddes et al., 2021). Governance is not just a reactive policy area; it actively shapes migration outcomes by setting legal categories, institutional arrangements, and regulatory mechanisms that determine who can move, under what conditions, and with what rights.

The theoretical basis of the governance of migration is informed by various theories of migration. Firstly, the social transformation perspective views the governance of migration as a product of globalisation and socio-economic restructuring (Castles, 2010). Secondly, the aspirations-capabilities perspective views the governance of migration as a product of the interaction between migrants' aspirations and their capabilities to migrate (de Haas, 2021).

Finally, the governance of migration is characterised by its multi-level, transnational nature, in which decision-making occurs at various levels of governance (Bauböck, 2017). This perspective views the governance of migration as a product of the interaction between states and international actors in regulating the migration process (Betts, 2013). This perspective on the governance of migration is important for understanding the significance of rights-based approaches to governance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises characterised by the vulnerability of migrants due to the failure of governance structures to respond to their situation.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

To understand how COVID-19 affects migrants, we need a comprehensive framework that links migration governance with labour market institutions and social protection systems. Migration governance encompasses the policies, institutions, and regulatory frameworks that influence migration patterns and the rights and welfare of migrants (Betts, 2011; de Haas et al., 2018). From a rights-based governance standpoint, migration policies ought to emphasise safeguarding human rights, equitable access to public services, and the principle of non-discrimination regardless of legal status (Carens, 2013; Piper, 2008). But in reality, many governance systems remain restrictive and exclusive, especially during times of crisis. A focus on 'labour migration governance' is also relevant, with an emphasis on regulating migrant labour markets, including provisions on employment rights, wage levels, and working conditions.

According to previous research, migrants are disproportionately represented in precarious and informal jobs where labour rights are limited, thereby exposing them to economic vulnerability (Anderson, 2010; Ruhs, 2013). Related to this is the 'social protection' framework, which emphasises the need to address welfare provisions and healthcare accessibility to address migrant insecurity (Gentilini et al., 2020; Sabates-Wheeler & Feldman, 2011). Finally, 'vulnerability theory' offers an analytical framework for understanding the impact of inequalities on the migration experience, especially in times of crisis, with an emphasis on labour-market inequalities and institutional exclusion (Standing, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2018). These theories offer an analytical framework to understand the impact of 'governance failure' in managing the COVID-19 crisis on migrant vulnerabilities and the need for more inclusive migration policies.

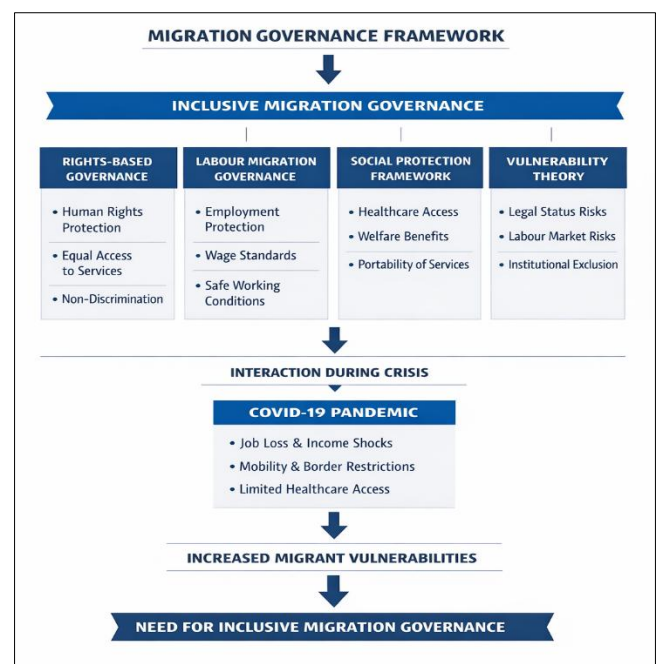


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Inclusive Migration Governance and Migrant Vulnerabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

It implies that, given these current circumstances, migrants are already frequently in precarious situations. Combining these viewpoints makes it easier to see how governance failures during the COVID-19 pandemic increased migrant vulnerability and exposed flaws in inclusive migration policy.

3. Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive narrative literature review methodology to analyse the correlation between migration governance and migrant vulnerabilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Narrative reviews are especially beneficial in interdisciplinary domains such as migration studies, as they enable researchers to integrate diverse theoretical frameworks, empirical evidence, and policy discussions across different contexts (Aslany et al., 2021). The methodology emphasises the identification, analysis, and critical evaluation of existing scholarly literature and policy reports pertinent to migration governance and migrant vulnerability amid global crises.

3.1 Database Search Strategy

The literature review was conducted across major international research databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, which are recognized as credible sources for research on migration and the social sciences. These databases are deemed appropriate in this study because of their vast size of peer-reviewed journal articles and policy reports on migration, labour markets, and governance mechanisms. In addition to academic databases, the study also includes the information presented in the reports of different international organisations, which were also systematically reviewed. Some of these organizations are the International Organisation for Migration, the International Labour Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the United Nations Network on Migration that have released reports on the global migration trends and policy processes.

3.2 Keywords and Search Terms

The search of the literature on the respective databases has been conducted using a structured approach to the keyword search using combinations of the search terms in relation to the governance of migration, migrant vulnerability, and the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. Search results were narrowed using Boolean search operators such as AND and OR. The search words employed in the search process include: “migration governance”, “migrant workers”, “COVID-19 pandemic”, “migrant vulnerability”, “labour migration governance”, “social protection of migrants”, “migration policy responses”, “inclusive migration governance”, among others. This approach is frequently used in migration research to ensure a thorough review of all relevant literature on the research topic.

3.3 Time Period of the Review

The literature review focuses on publications from 2020 to 2024. The time frame encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent scholarly and policy discussions of migrant vulnerabilities and governance response measures. The limitation to this timeframe is to make sure that the study captures the latest empirical data and policy changes associated with the pandemic and its effect on migrant populations.

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the quality and relevance of the selected literature, inclusion criteria were developed. First, peer-reviewed journal articles, international policy reports, and credible working papers that addressed migration governance, migrant labour market, or migrant vulnerability amid the COVID-19 pandemic were only chosen. Second, only literature written in English and with an accessible full text was considered. Lastly, only migration governance, labour migration systems, or social protection framework literature was picked.

The exclusion criteria were literature published prior to 2020 that did not discuss migration, or that was published as opinion pieces, editorials or commentaries. These inclusion criteria have been widely used in literature reviews to ensure academic rigor, and only literature that will answer the research questions will be selected.

3.5 Data Analysis and Synthesis

The research was conducted through systematic screening and selection to identify pertinent literature. During the initial stage, 350 articles were identified in various scholarly databases with the help of predefined search terms associated with migration, COVID-19, labour markets, and social protection. In the second step, duplicate records were removed, leaving 300 distinct studies. The screening of these studies was then based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the research objectives. After this preliminary screening, 80 studies were retained. During the third stage, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to evaluate full-text articles, including their relevance to migration governance, labour market outcomes, and policy responses during COVID-19. This narrowed down to a final sample size of 35 studies, which were incorporated to be analysed in this paper.

After the screening, the selected studies were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. These were arranged into major themes of analysis, such as: (i) Migration Governance in the Global Context, (ii) Migrant Vulnerabilities During COVID-19, (iii) Policy Responses and Governance Challenges, (iv) Migration Crisis in India. With this thematic approach, a critical evaluation of the role of the governance systems in the vulnerabilities of migrants and the emerging debates in the world migration literature are highlighted.

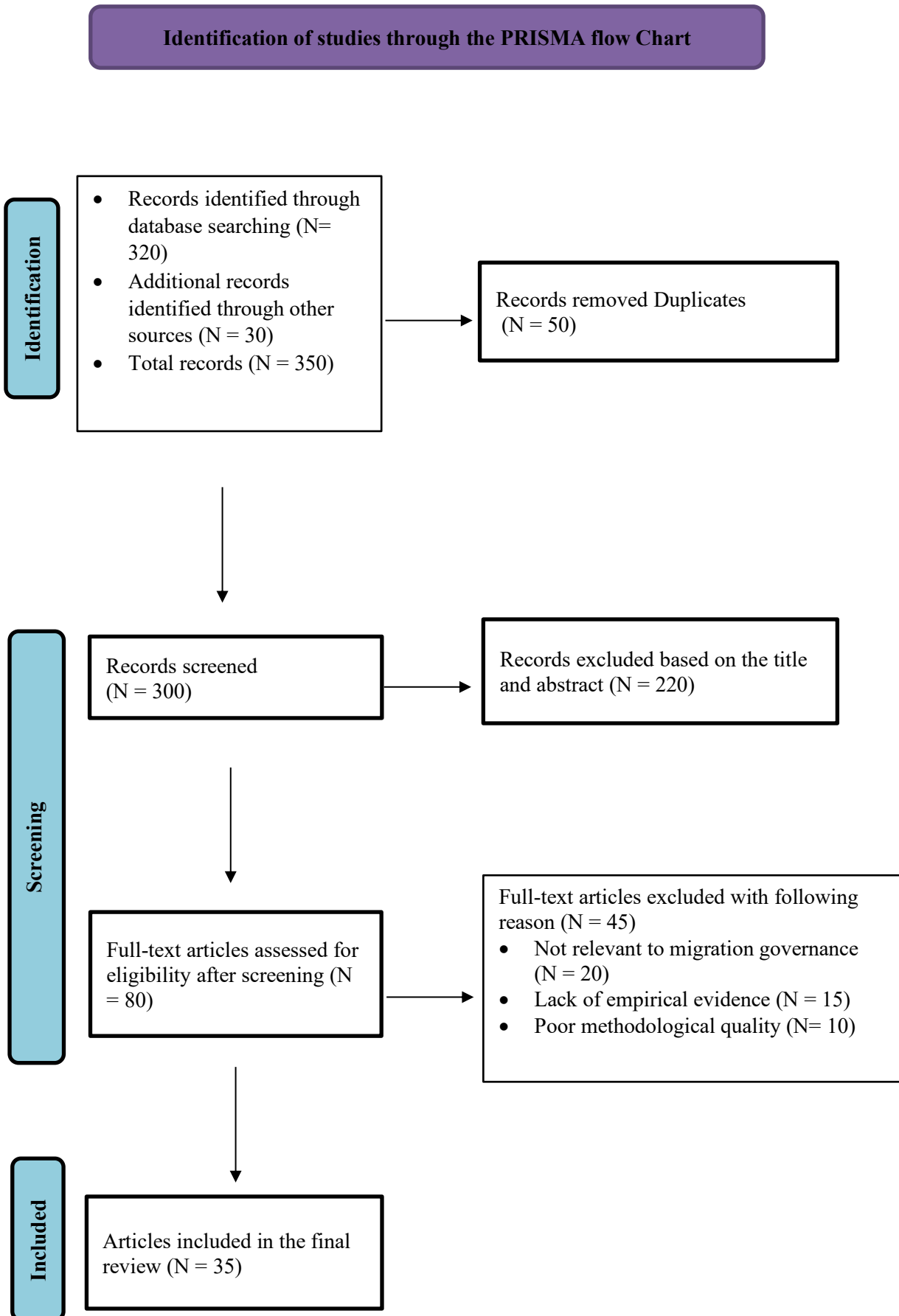


Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart

Source: Author compilation

Overall, this approach offers a structured yet adaptable framework for integrating various forms of academic and policy data, aiding us in comprehending the issues of migration governance and the vulnerability of migrants throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Result and discussion

This thematic synthesis interrogates migration governance during COVID-19 through four interlinked lenses: global governance asymmetries, intensified migrant precarity, fragmented policy responses, and India's crisis-specific dynamics. It reveals how structural inequalities and institutional incoherence exacerbated vulnerabilities, while uneven state capacity shaped outcomes. The analysis foregrounds the limits of reactive governance and underscores the need for integrated, rights-based frameworks to address systemic exclusions embedded within crisis-driven migration regimes.

4.1 Migration Governance in the Global Context

Global migration governance comprises the institutional structures, norms, and policy frameworks through which states and international organisations, jointly, control the movement of migrants and protect their rights. Theoretically, migration governance may be defined as a migration regime, a complex system of institutions, policies, and actors that interrelate at multiple levels of governance (Betts, 2011; Hollifield et al., 2014). Migration rule, unlike the world regimes of trade or finance, remains fragmented, as states are unwilling to give up their sovereignty over borders and the free movement of labour (Ghosh, 2000). Due to this tendency, international cooperation on migration is largely conducted through soft law, voluntary contracts, and multilateral policy consultations rather than through an international treaty (Betts & Kainz, 2017). Irrespective of these institutional drawbacks, International organisations have emerged as imperative for addressing matters of migration governance and promoting rights-based policies.

As part of this evolving model of governance, the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) has assumed an important role in global migration governance. The organisation, established in 1951, began operations during the post-war period; however, over time, it has evolved into an international agency engaged in the management of migration, humanitarian assistance, and policy coordination. Among institutional changes, the formal incorporation of the IOM into the United Nations system in 2016 deserves mention, as it has improved coordination among international institutions responsible for migration. The IOM now leads the UN Network on Migration and supports the introduction of the first global migration governance regime, the Global Compact of Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). The organisation also takes part in the coordination of policies between states using the data on migrations and migration initiatives, technical cooperation, and capacity-building programs and supports evidence-based migration governance (Geiger & Pécoud, 2014; Lavenex,

2018). Nevertheless, the researchers have observed that IOM's operations in managing migration tend to be skewed toward the interests of the state, especially in border control and policies of returning people, and do not reflect the agendas of the wider migrant protection (Geiger & Pécoud, 2014).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has an indirect role, which deals with labour standards and the safeguarding of the rights of migrant employees. The ILO, being the primary global labour regulatory authority, has come up with several conventions and policy frameworks to secure equal treatment of migrant workers, fair labour recruitment, and social protection of migrant workers. The crucial aspect of its policy is the Decent Work Agenda that includes governance of labour migration and the wider goals of social justice and inclusive economic growth (Castles et al., 2014). The ILO is also trying to address the weak structural issues facing migrant workers through policy advocacy on rights-based labour migration that includes low wages, poor working conditions, and labour exploitation. However, the success of these norms is mainly conditioned by the fact that they are applied nationwide, and there are only a few adopted migrant worker conventions that restrict the authority of the organisation (Hollifield et al., 2014; Ruhs, 2013).

The general normative framework of international migration, offered on the international level, is offered by the United Nations. Multilateral cooperation is used to address the challenges of migration and protect the displaced individuals by the UN specialised agencies, which include the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The international activities, as most recently the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, are significant measures towards the development of international mechanisms of migration regulation. Although these agreements are not binding, they may provide principles that the states should pursue to ensure that they coordinate better policies, accept more responsibility, and involve migration issues in sustainable development policies (Betts & Kainz, 2017; Lavenex, 2018).

It is interesting to note that rights-based policies focused on defending the human rights of migrants, irrespective of their legal status, are quickly becoming the focus of migration governance in the contemporary world. These policies are intended to guarantee that migrants have access to basic services, equal working conditions, and social security systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that migrants in the world face some severe structural flaws, including job loss, limited mobility, and access to healthcare and welfare services. The following issues demonstrated the necessity of more inclusive governance that would consider migrants as major players of economic and social development, rather than as temporary sources of labour (Castles et al., 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021). The solution, therefore, to reduce the vulnerability of migrants and create a stronger labour

market within the post-pandemic global economy is through enhanced rights-based migration governance.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that the issue of global migration governance constitutes a very complex web of institutions and policy systems that are motivated by the system of the IOM, ILO and the United Nations. The IOM deals primarily with the control of migration and the coordination of operations, whereas the ILO promotes labour standards and the protection of migrant workers, and the UN offers the broader normative framework of multilateral cooperation. Together, these institutions assist in changing the governance systems, establishing a balance between the national migration control and the protection of the rights of migrants in the world, which is nowadays more interconnected.

4.2. Migrant Vulnerabilities During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated structural vulnerabilities faced by migrants worldwide. The socio-economic and health consequences of the crisis were disproportionately experienced by migrant populations, as they were concentrated in precarious forms of employment, had restricted access to social protection, and faced poor housing and healthcare conditions (Castles et al., 2014; Guadagno, 2020). In migration governance terms, the pandemic underscored migrants' potential exposure to economic and social risks stemming from structural inequalities in labour markets and migration regimes during global crises (Hollifield et al., 2014). With nations putting lockdowns, closing borders, and restricting mobility, migrants, especially those working in informal economies, suffered great setbacks to their livelihoods and well-being.

Among the most obvious effects of the pandemic on migrants were mass unemployment and loss of income. The hospitality and construction sectors, domestic work, and other service industries are among the few sectors where migrants are overrepresented and were hit hard by lockdown protocols. With a decline in economic activities worldwide, most migrant workers lost their jobs or had their hours cut, without compensation and unemployment benefits (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020; OECD, 2020). Research has established that migrant workers tend to lose their jobs first and are the last to regain employment after the crisis because of their temporary or irregular employment status (Ruhs, 2013). This was especially challenging for migrant workers in developing nations, where labour markets tend to be informal and social protection is scarce.

Another closely related factor in job loss was migrants' overrepresentation in informal jobs, which made them much more vulnerable during the pandemic. The informal employment is usually not legally protected, has no stable employment, and no access to labour rights, which means that the migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation and lack economic security. In most economies, migrant workers in the informal sector were not considered in government relief programs, wage subsidies, and social protection introduced during the pandemic (ILO, 2020). Consequently, migrants may find themselves in greater financial distress than native workers, underscoring the structural inequality in labour markets and migration policies (Castles et al., 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021).

Poor housing and living standards were the other vital component of migrant vulnerability in the face of the pandemic. A big number of migrants reside in crowded homes, hostels, or slums, in which it is hard to adhere to physical distancing and cleanliness. These living conditions increased the likelihood of COVID-19 spread and even led to local outbreaks among migrant populations in multiple countries (Guadagno, 2020). Moreover, migrant workers in the agricultural sector, construction, and domestic services often live in accommodation provided by employers, which might not meet appropriate health and safety standards, thereby aggravating their vulnerability to health hazards during the pandemic (OECD, 2020). There was also a high risk of health and healthcare access restrictions faced by migrants during the COVID-19 crisis. Legally, linguistically, and institutionally, migrants in many cases can not access public healthcare services, at least undocumented migrants or those with temporary legal status. Citizens also feared being deported, having no health insurance, and being poorly aware of the healthcare systems, which further discouraged migrants seeking medical help, amplifying the chances of undetected infections and untimely treatment (Guadagno, 2020; Piper & Foley, 2021). These obstacles underlined the need to adopt rights-based migration policies that promote fair access to healthcare irrespective of migration status.

Lastly, the pandemic had a major impact on migrants and the displaced population owing to border closures and travel limitations. Governments around the world implemented strict border controls to prevent the spread of COVID-19, thereby halting migration flows, leaving most migrants suspended between their landing and sending countries or states. This was especially true of seasonal and temporary migrant workers, as travel bans prevented them from returning to their jobs or home nations (IMO, 2022). These restrictions also disrupted remittance flows and family reunification, further exacerbating the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on migrant households (OECD, 2020).

In general, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the severe structural disparities in relation to migrant populations across the globe. The migrants were disproportionately affected by employment insecurity, informal labour, poor housing environment, lack of access to healthcare services, and movement. Such weaknesses diminish the timeliness of the inclusion and rights-based migration governance frameworks that incorporate migrant protection into communal health responses and labour market approaches amid global crises (Castles et al., 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021). The need to strengthen such governance mechanisms can be achieved to ensure the construction of more resilient and equitable migration systems in the post-pandemic world.

4.3 Policy Responses and Governance Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the most significant global policy responses, dramatically changing migration governance and revealing vulnerabilities in current policy frameworks. Emergency measures governments took to control the spread of the virus included lockdowns, border closures, and mobility restrictions. Although these

interventions were first and foremost public health actions, their implications for migrants and migrant workers were far-reaching, as they highlighted governance issues in ensuring inclusive protection in the face of crisis (Castles et al., 2014; Hollifield et al., 2014). Specifically, the pandemic underscored the inadequacy of current migration governance systems in responding to labour market shocks and in providing social safeguards for migrant communities.

Lockdowns at a national level are among the policy measures that have been taken against the coronavirus pandemic, and such policy measures adversely affected the economies and labour markets around the world. Industries that depend highly on migrant workers for operations in sectors such as constructions, housekeeping, hotels, and farming shut down, or reduced production as a result. Such measures led to job losses, lower wages, and employment insecurity among migrant workers (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Learning of migration, including workplaces, health care facilities, and basic necessities, among others, of the migrants was also adversely affected by lockdown policies implemented in some countries. The implementation of lockdown measures during a crisis situation hardly considered the socio-economic conditions of the migrants, particularly the ones working in informal sectors (OECD, 2020).

The other important aspect of governance during the pandemic was border controls and international mobility restrictions. Governments worldwide imposed strict border restrictions and travel bans to prevent the cross-border spread of the virus. Although these were intended to safeguard people's health, they had a significant impact on global migration mechanisms. It particularly affected temporary and seasonal migrant workers, who were unable to enter either their destination or home countries due to travel restrictions (IMO, 2022). In other instances, the migrants were left behind in transit countries or were separated from their families for long periods. The broader economic impact was also evident in labour shortages in sectors that rely on migrant labour and a reduction in remittance flows to migrant-sending countries (Ruhs, 2013).

The pandemic also demonstrated the level of disruptions in the labour market for migrant workers. The migrants are overrepresented in vulnerable and low-paid industries that are typified by temporary employment and minimal labour rights. As a result, they were the first to become jobless during the crisis and the last to benefit from economic rescue efforts (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Also, a significant number of migrant workers remained in critical sectors of healthcare, agriculture, and food supply chains, where they were more exposed to COVID-19 without adequate occupational safety protections. These processes illustrate the structural inequities embedded in labour markets that determine migrants' susceptibility to economic shocks (Castles et al., 2014).

A major governance challenge during the pandemic was the significant social protection gaps faced by migrant populations. Most governments for migrants, especially the irregular or transitory ones, were excluded from government relief programmes, unemployment benefits,

and healthcare support systems (ILO, 2020). Inaccessibility to welfare programs also enhanced the economic insecurity of migrants and negatively impacted the way they managed to struggle with the crisis. Researchers have claimed that these exclusionary policies have weakened the effectiveness in responding to public health because they have left vulnerable groups without proper assistance (Piper & Foley, 2021). The pandemic, in turn, reinforced the need for more inclusive social protection systems that can cover migrants regardless of their legal status.

In general, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the reactions to policies revealed significant flaws in the current migration governance systems. The migrant populations were disproportionately impacted by lockdown policies, border closures, labour market interruptions, and failures of social protection systems, which increased socio-economic vulnerability. To mitigate such governance issues, international collaboration must be enhanced and inclusive, and rights-based migration policies should be implemented, which incorporate the protection of migrants as a part of the crisis management response (Betts & Kainz, 2017; Ruhs, 2013). Such frameworks will also be crucial for establishing effective migration governance capacity to safeguard the migrant population in the event of a future global crisis.

4.4 Migration Crisis in India

COVID-19 has led to a massive internal migration in India. It is probably one of the biggest migrations in Indian history. The whole country was put on lockdown in March 2020, and most migrant workers lost their jobs, homes, and food, which led to the collapse of the economy. Most Indian labour is informal (i.e., not paying taxes), and the majority of migrant workers are in construction, factories, and domestic work, or are proprietors of small businesses (Kesar et al., 2021). All such activities were abruptly halted when the lockdown was imposed, and many migrants thus could not make a living or sustain themselves in the cities. Consequently, millions of individuals returned to their states, but many had to endure a very challenging long-distance migration (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Srivastava, 2020c) .

The recent crisis made it apparent how flawed India's internal migration system is, particularly for those working in the informal sector. The majority of individuals who move within India lack secure job contracts, social security, and a safe place to reside. Consequently, they will tend to be hit hard when the economy is struck by an unexpected occurrence (Kone et al., 2018). During the lockdown, most migrants were unable to access government aid programs, as some social resources, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides food products, may have required registration in a location or a long duration of residence there. As a result, migrants in the cities they had relocated to struggled to access food, healthcare, or financial assistance (Srivastava, 2020a) . According to experts, the pandemic revealed long-term issues in India's migration management, namely the country's lack of effective mechanisms to support those who migrate to the country to work (Kesar et al., 2021).

Once the lockdown ended, the migrant workers started moving out of the cities of India in a mass exodus, and soon the situation was unbearable because of a shortage of even basic needs like sanitation and food. There were also cases of migrants who started walking or cycling hundreds of kilometres from the cities to villages (Agarwala, 2020). The media and research showed that thousands of people were undertaking this journey without adequate food, water and sleep. This reverse flow of migrants was magnified manyfold, disrupting urban labour markets and straining already constrained rural economies (Agarwala, 2020). The pandemic showed that the urban economy in India relied on the migrant worker, and the conditions under which they had to work and live were extremely poor (Kone et al., 2018).

To address the crisis, the Government of India presented various policy responses to reduce the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic on at-risk groups. Among the most dramatic actions was the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) relief programme, which provided free food grains, cash transfers, and other financial aid to low-income households. The government also expanded the rural employment guarantee program under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to create more jobs for returning migrant workers (Kesar et al., 2021). Also, special trains called Shramik trains were organised to bring stranded migrants back to their home states.

The other important policy concern was labour policy reforms and migrant registration systems introduced by the central and state governments. We also witnessed states introduce digital

platforms to register migrant workers and monitor their flows, enabling relief delivery and job assistance. The One Nation One Ration Card scheme was a major step towards enhancing food security for migrant workers, enabling them to carry their ration benefits across states. However, the researchers highlight that, despite these initiatives, many migrant workers were not included in relief programs due to documentation requirements, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic hurdles (Srivastava, 2020; Agarwala, 2020).

Generally, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed critical weaknesses in India's migration governance system. The migrant labour Exodus and internal migration crisis point to the precariousness of the situation of the millions of migrant workers who are the backbone of the Indian urban economy. As government relief packages, labour policy adjustments. Migration registration initiatives were a significant policy response to the crisis, highlighting the urgent need for more inclusive and comprehensive migration governance in India. Enhancing the portability of social protection, strengthening the implementation of labour rights, and creating reliable systems for systematic information about migrant workers are key steps to reduce migrants' vulnerability and build more resilient migration governance in the years to come (Kesar et al., 2021; Kone et al., 2018).

5. Key Finding and Research Gap

Although much scholarly literature has explored migration governance and the vulnerabilities migrants

face during the COVID-19 pandemic, significant gaps remain in the research. To begin with, the existing literature has given very little attention to the gendered aspects of migration vulnerabilities. Whilst the pandemic has been widely known to disproportionately affect migrants, the experience of women migrant workers, especially those working in the domestic work industry, care services, and the informal sectors, has not been well studied (Castles et al., 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021). A high-quality, gender-sensitive analytical framework is thus required to comprehend the interplay between migration governance systems and labour-market disparities, thereby defining differentiated outcomes for male and female migrants.

Second, much of the migration literature focuses on international migration, and little has been written about internal migration, particularly in developing nations like India (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Kone et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the magnitude and significance of internal migration systems, the need for better-structured studies of internal migrant labour markets, access to social protection, and the need for policy responses. Third, migration governance frameworks and their effectiveness in providing security to migrant workers in times of crisis are not widely assessed. Despite extensive debate surrounding global initiatives such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, there is a paucity of empirical evaluations of policy implementation and its effects on policy (Betts, 2011; Lavenex, 2018).

Lastly, there are still many limitations in the literature on migrant workers, especially those not on formal employment contracts or legalised documents. Such gaps impede the development of evidence-based migration policies and restrict researchers' ability to properly evaluate migrant vulnerability (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrenius, 2014; Srivastava, 2020). To leverage inclusive and rights-based migration governance research, it is necessary to address these gaps.

6. Policy Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the need to adopt more inclusive migration governance frameworks that account for migrant workers' state-level structural vulnerabilities. The policymakers should implement rights-based strategies that view migrants as part of economic and social systems rather than as short-term, disposable workers (Castles et al., 2014; Ruhs, 2013). Enhancement of international and national governance systems in line with the global principles presented in the Global Compact 2011, Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, can help facilitate more coherent and inclusive policy responses in the event of future crises (Betts, 2011). One of the policy priorities is to create portable social protection systems that enable migrant workers to access benefits such as healthcare, food security, and unemployment benefits, whether they are in their country of origin or elsewhere. These mechanisms are especially significant for internal migrants and for workers who cross borders and are frequently disqualified by the historical welfare system (Kone et al., 2018; Srivastava,

2020b). Moreover, governments should strengthen the enforcement of labour rights in industries that rely heavily on migrant workers. Making the hiring practices, workplace safety conditions, and equal wage provisions can both mitigate the likelihood of exploitation and financial insecurity among migrant workers to a great extent (Hollifield et al., 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021).

Lastly, evidence-based policymaking requires better systems for collecting migration data and for registration. Quality and thorough data on migration can be used to improve policy design, facilitate the delivery of targeted support, and help develop strategies to respond to crises among migrant populations (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Guadagno, 2020).

7. Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that global and national migration regimes had significant structural weaknesses, especially for migrant workers who are in formal and precarious jobs. This paper has explored the overlap of migration governance and migrant vulnerabilities in the pandemic, with how lockdown regulations, labour market shocks, border closures, and restrictions on access to social services disproportionately affected migrant groups. The data provided on the global scale and on the Indian level proves that migrants faced serious difficulties connected to the loss of employment, unfavourable living conditions, limited access to healthcare facilities, and travel restrictions. The findings presented above confirm the hypothesis that contemporary migration governance frameworks are inadequate in coping with the socio-economic challenges of migrant labourers, especially those engaged in informal labour markets. As regards the major issues discussed in the analysis above, it is necessary to highlight their relevance to migration governance. Firstly, the findings reveal the need to develop more effective inclusion strategies within migration governance. Policy solutions should focus on promoting the human rights agenda of migrants, implementing portable social protection measures, and enhancing labour conditions. Action Plans based on the tenets of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration are significant for promoting international cooperation and human rights

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frameworks, especially regarding migrant security in crisis management. Further research should focus on empirical studies of internal migration systems, gender dynamics in migration, and the impact of migration policies on overcoming migrant vulnerabilities. Moreover, establishing reliable migration information systems and adopting interdisciplinary research methodologies will be essential to developing resilient frameworks for migration governance.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

While the study provides useful information on migration governance and migrant vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also has limitations that must be noted. First, the analysis is mainly based on secondary sources and literature, which can limit the ability to reflect the full spectrum of migrant experiences across various areas and sectors. The population of migrant workers is highly diverse, and the risk factors are typically predetermined by numerous factors, such as gender, legal status, occupation, and migration type. In turn, the findings of this study do not always reflect on the complexity of the migration experiences. Second, the study largely relies on a macro-level view of governance systems and policy reactions, which may not capture micro-level dynamics, such as household coping, community support, and informal institutional reactions, which affect the resilience of migrants in times of crisis. Moreover, lack of reliable and complete information on informal migrant workers is also a major constraint both to researchers and policymakers.

Longitudinal, field-based studies of internal migrants in major sending and receiving areas should be prioritized in future research to measure the post-pandemic effects on wages, employment stability, and access to social protection. Moreover, gender-disaggregated analyses should consider differences in vulnerability between informal and platform work, especially unpaid care burdens and mobility restrictions. Increasing administrative data systems with integration of labour, health, and mobility data will make migration governance frameworks more precise, evidence-based and locally responsive...

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