

Female Migrant Workers in Bhutan's Liquor Industry: From Economic to Gendered Vulnerabilities

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Abstract: This article highlights the social and gendered vulnerabilities faced by female migrant workers in Bhutan's liquor industry. The majority of employees in the liquor industry are single women from rural areas. Their employment offers them financial independence but simultaneously exposes them to societal stigma, gender-based discrimination, and often also precarious living conditions. This article emphasizes the complex interplay between economic opportunities and gendered vulnerabilities, illustrating how migration and factory work serve as both a livelihood and a site of social negotiation for these women.

Keywords: Gender hierarchies and relations, women, liquor industry, Pasakha, livelihoods, migration.

Introduction

Bhutan is the world's most mountainous country, when measured by the

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percentage of the landmass covered in mountains. The only strip of flatland lies to the south, bordering the Indian states of West-Bengal and Assam. It is on this flatland, stretching across multiple Dzongkhags (districts) where most of Bhutan's industries and factories are located. One such factory we refer to by the pseudonym of 'Himalayan Distillery.' The liquor produced here is made out of Himalayan spring water and its end products, known by different brands, dominate the domestic market. The majority of the workforce in this factory consists of single women labour migrants. An *Asian Development Bank* report in 2011 established that 'the poorest members of Bhutanese society are women who head rural households due to divorce or widowhood. While the survival of their households depends on their income-earning potential, they face limited employment opportunities.' What further augments their dire situation, the report diagnoses, are the 'low educational levels among rural women' (2011: 25-26). In rural Bhutan, these single female-headed households are therefore identified as particularly economically vulnerable.

The nearly a decade-and-a-half since the publication of this report witnessed a steep rise in internal migration in Bhutan. Single (whether unmarried, divorced, or widowed) and lowly educated rural women are part of this trend. In the southern industrial belt, it is the Himalayan Distillery which serves as a symbol of hope, granting employment opportunities and financial independence to marginalized groups of mostly lowly-educated women. According to a factory official, of it is nearly 400 current employees, around 70% are female. The vast majority of these female employees are single women. This gender distribution is notable, as it contrasts with the typically male-dominated workforce in other factories, such as those producing steel and chemicals.

Women Migrant Labourers in the Liquor Industry

The factory prefers recruiting single women as, in the absence of immediate family responsibilities, they are seen as more flexible in their working-hours, including to work night-shifts and overtime. The nature of the work – mostly packaging, but also cleaning, quality-control, and administration – is also considered to be well-suited to women. Crucially, the factory demands no formal educational qualifications and so appeals especially to those women with limited schooling. Many of the female employees interpret the factory's hiring preference for single women as a form of generosity. For the female labour migrants, the Himalayan Distillery offers them a sense of financial independence. Depending on the number of shifts they work, as well as their seniority, the women workers earn anywhere between Nu 8000-10,000 a month, which, while considered a low wage in Bhutan, is significantly higher than their expected earning in their home villages, mostly in agriculture.

The women migrant workers rent accommodation. Housing is often simple with rusty corrugated sheets, uneven flooring, and irregular water supply. Toilets must be shared between residents and this at times makes maintaining hygiene a challenge. Due to the constrained toilet and water facilities, women are regularly compelled to bathe in open areas near public water taps. This compromises their privacy and makes them feel vulnerable. They complain about the occasional insinuating and snide remarks that are thrown at them by passers-by while bathing. On the flipside, the housing is considered affordable, with a rent of approximately Nu 2000,- excluding water and electricity. The salary and accommodation together provides them, as they also highlight, with an aspired sense of livelihood security. To a degree, then, their employment in the Himalayan Distillery helped to alleviate their earlier economic vulnerabilities.

New Vulnerabilities

However, their status as single female labour migrants in the Himalayan Distillery also comes with a new set of vulnerabilities, most of them strongly gendered. The absence of privacy while bathing and related snide remarks is one example of these gendered vulnerabilities. Within the wider society, the single female workers of the distillery have come to be associated with the product they help to produce, namely alcohol. While the consumption of alcohol is widely accepted in Bhutanese society, and alcohol carries cultural and ritual significance, its consumption is often evaluated differently for men and women. Women's public association with alcohol, whether as consumers or – in our case – as producers, invites social labeling, negative stereotyping, and stigma. It is socially connotative of a certain moral laxity, which reveals in expressions towards the female migrant labourers in the factory being 'characterless' and 'sexually available.'

Pema is a 44 year old ex-employee of the distillery, who now runs a small grocery shop. She shared her experiences of being judged by society for working in the Himalayan Distillery. She highlighted how the company bus that daily shuttles in and out of the distillery is referred to as *maal gari*, which freely translates to 'goods train', which, in turn, is slang to describe women 'who can be easily possessed or desired by men.' Wangmo, a 20-year old single female factory worker, confessed how her relatives in the village strongly opposed her joining the factory. They worried about the societal stigma that existed against women employed in the alcohol industry. Despite this resistance, Wangmo felt compelled to take the job because, as the eldest daughter, she had to assume financial responsibilities, especially following her parents' divorce. Wangmo dropped out of school when she was in grade 10 and it was the Himalayan Distillery which offered her a job without having completed her education. She is now able to regularly send remittances to her father, as well as some pocket money to her siblings. Wangmo is well aware

of the gossip and negative stereotypes that exists about her and other female factory workers. However, she also highlights how her employment in this factory offers her much-desired economic security and independence, while she also has made many friends on the factory-floor and with whom she socializes after working-hours.

Overall, Wangmo argues that her living standards has increased due to her employment in the Himalayan Distillery. In fact, one reason why few married women are employed in the Himalayan Distillery is because their husbands actively discourage, even forbid them, from taking up employment in this factory due the social stigma that surround it. Single female workers in the factory diagnose a paradox in this stigma. They point out that the same men who speak derogatory about them on one day, try to persuade them to remarry with them the next, promising to be good fathers to their children and a better livelihood. However, most of the workers understand that these proposals aren't genuine and ignore them.

There of course exist internal dynamics and hierarchies within the women workforce. Different age groups express different interests. There are instances in which workers who have been regularized (permanent workers) assert dominance over newly hired casual workers, seizing preferred tasks within the processing plant for themselves and their friends, thereby limiting opportunities for casual workers. Similarly, during bus rides while going to or returning home from work, the permanent workers secure seats for their friends by reserving them with personal belongings, leaving no space for casual workers, who may even be asked to vacate seats they managed to secure, occasionally leading to arguments.

Social Stigma and Resilience

Another paradox is that for not a few of the women employees in the Himalayan Distillery the societal judgments they face in relation to their labour constitutes their second victimization by alcohol. Some of the workers shared about their past experiences of having endured domestic violence and abandonment by their husbands, often linked to alcohol. They talk about the role of alcohol in their divorce, or even in them becoming widows. They now find themselves producing the very product that had earlier significantly contributed to their economic vulnerability. But while this time alcohol was their pathway to economic security, the same alcohol also created new gendered vulnerabilities for them.

Some of the women workers in the Himalayan Distillery suffer from health issues such as migraines. Sonam, a divorcee, regularly takes medication for migraine. She shared how she married at a very young age to an alcoholic husband. 'My husband would come home drunk and abuse me. Because of this constant suffering I got a depression and began to suffer from migraine. There was a time when I had to take anti-depressant pills to sleep at night. After I migrated here things have improved, but I still fall sick often.' Because of her health problems, Sonam only earns around Nu 3000 – 4000,- a month. As she is a 'casual worker', the factory pays her for the number of shifts she works. This income barely covers the house rent. Casual female workers at the factory, such as Sonam, receive their pay in cash. Many of them are unfamiliar with mobile banking. They lack savings, as their salaries barely cover housing, living expenses, and pocket money for their children studying in boarding schools.

Most of the single women workers who have children stress the importance of their children's education. Sonam, who has two children, is adamant that they should finish their education till at least the 12th grade. She is illiterate but understands the value of education, especially as she suffered from an absence

of it. In the future, Sonam wishes to learn how to drive and to open a *pan* shop. However, her illiteracy holds her back. She worries that she wouldn't know how much money she should get from customers and the change she must return. When inquiring about her other aspirations, Sonam expresses that she longed to visit Dochula, which is a pilgrim site currently at the top of her wish-list. It came as a surprised that despite having worked in Thimphu for several years prior to migrating to the south, she never had the opportunity of visiting Dochula, which is just a 45-minutes' drive from Thimphu town. This illustrates her sacrificing personal aspirations due to economic constraints at home. Sonam found solace in the fact that she had visited Buddha Point during her time in Thimphu, not once but twice.

Conclusion

Overall, the Himalayan Distillery has emerged as a source of employment for single female labour migrants, offering them an opportunity to alleviate their economic vulnerabilities, including for those without formal education. However, employment in the Himalayan Distillery simultaneously exposes them to gendered vulnerabilities. They endure labeling and negative stereotyping, as well as often inadequate housing and water supply that compromise their privacy, and these challenges are often augmented by their illiteracy and lack of financial knowledge. Internal competition and division among the women on the work-floor further add to the complexities. Nevertheless, many of the single female migrant labours, with Sonam being exemplary, also display a remarkable sense of resilience, supporting themselves, striving for a brighter future, and supporting the education of their children. The life-histories and narratives of single female labour migrants in the Himalayan Distillery offer a poignant illustration of the complex interplay between economic and gendered vulnerabilities. While these vulnerabilities everywhere strongly intersect, both in rural and urban

Bhutan, for many of the single female workers in the Himalayan Distillery, their migration to the southern flatland and subsequent employment in the alcohol industry is experienced, to some degree, as a trade-off between economic and gendered vulnerabilities.

References

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