



Feminization without Empowerment? Evidence on Gendered Outcomes of International Migration in Punjab through the Lens of SDG 5 Framework

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ABSTRACT

Punjab's international migration landscape has witnessed increasing participation by women since 2010. This ongoing feminization of international migration may serve as an important catalyst for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) in Punjab. The present study analyzes the increasing participation of women in international migration from Punjab through the lens of SDG 5 to assess its alignment with the SDG 5. The study employs a case study approach based on open-ended interviews with 14 migrant women from different districts of Punjab conducted between 2023 and 2024. The findings reveal a paradoxical trend where more women are migrating abroad for education and employment over time, their agency is often instrumentalized in the majority of cases, particularly to support broader male migration aspirations. The feminization of international migration in Punjab embodies instrumental gender equality, characterized by surface-level progress while simultaneously masking persistent structural inequalities. The study recommends policies to strengthen women's autonomy, ensure safe migration, and enhance institutional support.

Keywords: Feminization; gender equality; international migration; Punjab; SDG 5; study-based migration.

INTRODUCTION

India's 200-year history of international migration is primarily the outcome of colonial legacies (Jain, 2020). However, this history is often told from the point of global labor markets and state-level economic gains, rather than through the lived realities of those who migrate, especially the marginalized, the underrepresented, and women whose mobility has been historically constrained by intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. Historically, colonial labor demands and British settlement policies spurred the movement of Indians, especially from agrarian and marginalized backgrounds. Today, India possesses the world's largest diaspora, with an estimated 35.42 million overseas Indians, including 15.85 million non-resident Indians (NRIs) and 19.57 million persons of Indian origin (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). It also receives the highest remittance inflows globally, with approximately \$78 billion in 2018, surpassing even China (Sasikumar & Hussain, 2008; IOM, 2020). However, the distribution of migration distribution across its states, genders and social strata is found to be highly uneven (Singla et al., 2025).

While the mainstream discourse acknowledges India's contribution to the global economy through migration of skilled manpower, often overlooked is the invisible nature of labor and incremental social sacrifices and systematic exclusions experienced by marginalized sections of society, especially women. Historically, women have been on the periphery of discourse on migration. They have been conceived of as dependents, caregivers, or second migrants, rather than as independent agents. Recently, however, there have been signs of a slow but significant turnaround. The participation of women in international migration from India has experienced a steady rise over time (Kôu & Bailey, 2017). It increased from 2.6 million in 1990 to 6.6 million in 2024. Interestingly, their participation was estimated to surpass one-third of the total number of India immigrants all over the world (Suresh, 2025).

Punjab is one of the economically advanced states of India (Singh, 2022) and stands at the forefront of India's emigration story (Laudini, 2024). Punjab migration patterns constitute diverse complex dynamics pertaining to its caste and gender aspects and thus it provides important insights with regard to various socio-cultural contradictions (Singh et al., 2022). Punjabi migration, once well known for its vital role in rural development, welfare of rural households and significant contribution to national foreign exchange reserves, has also been characterized by some adverse effects such as widening socio-economic inequalities within the state as well as brain drain in the long run (Agnihotri et al., 2022). In this view, with approximately 12

million Punjabis living abroad, the phenomenon of international migration from Punjab is often regarded as one of the success stories of global mobility (Hindustan Times, 2018). However, it constitutes the complex reality of demographic drain, generational dislocation and gendered inequalities due to which it is not easy to determine who decides and who benefits from migration decisions of households (Kapuria & Birwal, 2017; Kaur, 2022; Sharma et al., 2023).

Known for its high emigration rates since the colonial period, Punjab's migration pathways have historically contributed to rural development, household welfare, economic growth and foreign exchange reserves for India (Singh & Singh, 2019). Remittances have transformed the state's agrarian landscape, spurred infrastructural growth, and raised living standards in many villages. However, this mass out-migration has not been without social and economic contradictions, such as the permanent settlement of entire families abroad, leading to a demographic drain and a decline in remittance flows back to Punjab (Kapuria & Birwal, 2017; Deshpande, 2020; Kaur, 2022; Kaur & Brar, 2022; Sharma et al., 2023). Historically, Punjab has sent its skilled human resources to the countries of the First World during the colonial period. Later, the skilled workforce started migrating to developing countries also. Post-independence, Punjabis have carried on migration based on their skills and many of them settled abroad under the conducive residency policies of destination countries (Thandi, 2006). During this period, predominantly Punjabi males were migrating abroad, leading to migration of other family members or migration of whole families (Singh et al., 2024).

Empirical studies like Salt (1987) and Zlotnik (1999) showed that by the late 20th century, migration became more global and included more women, who made up nearly half of the global migrant population. In 2005, women accounted for roughly 12% of all international migrants from the state. By 2022, this figure had risen to over 35% (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The bulk of this increase is attributable to student migration to countries like Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (UK), which have liberal post-study work policies (Nagpal, 2024). In line with global trends, data show a steady increase in the share of women among international migrants from Punjab. Since 2010, the increased engagement of women in international migration, particularly through study-based visas, has emerged as a significant shift in the migration trends (Kaur, 2020).

Earlier, international migration was a majorly male and work-based activity and recently, young women migrating abroad, especially to pursue higher education, seem to be exhibiting progress in achieving gender equality in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which aims at

ensuring gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, 2025). However, it is very surprising to see the incidence of this highly progressive trend in the very orthodox society. Therefore, this progress requires critical analysis from the perspective of women for whom migration decisions are not independent and are framed not just by gender but also by caste, rurality and economic status.

It is argued that migration helps women to gain social mobility, income and empowerment (Bachan, 2018; de Brauw et al. 2021). On the other hand, however, the number of women migrating abroad has been increasing; they still face several vulnerabilities like discrimination, gender-based violence, trafficking, and exploitation (Boyd, 2021; Abel, 2022). In this way, there is close interaction between SDG 5 and migration in several ways. Discussing women's migration in view of SDG 5 is important to explore whether women make their migration decisions independently for their own welfare or they are being used as an instrument by the households to settle their male members abroad, which is referred to as instrumentalization of women's migration potential. This instrumentalization generally shows an increase in the number of migrating women but does not reduce their gender-based vulnerabilities. Thus, the instrumentalization of women's migration raises important questions about the impact of their migration on their qualitative advancement in terms of equality and agency (O'Neil et al., 2016).

Despite the highly patriarchal cultural nature of Punjabi society, the number of women migrating abroad for study or work purposes has been increasing during recent times (Singh, 2025; Thapan, 2025). Therefore, there is a dire need to examine this trade-off to explore the clear picture of gender equality in access to economic resources, economic decision-making, social mobility, autonomy and migration decision-making in the context of SDG 5. In this view, this study makes a maiden attempt to analyze the phenomenon of women's migration through the lens of SDG 5. This study becomes very significant as it addresses highly pertinent questions: how does feminization of international migration in Punjab contribute to the advancement toward SDG 5? What economic, social, and cultural forces are responsible for this change? And how should policy respond to the complex intersections of gender, migration, and development? The increasing participation of women suggests a movement towards gender equality in international migration from Punjab, although no research study has conclusively established this. Therefore, this study explores the changing patterns of international migration from Punjab and examines their alignment with the discourses of gender equality initiated by SDG 5.

This article is structured into six broad sections. Beginning with an introduction in section 1, the literature review is presented in section 2. Section 3 deals with the methodology and data used in the analysis of the research problem. Section 4 outlines the findings emerging out of the primary data. Section 5 presents discussion on the findings. Lastly, section 6 provides broad conclusions, policy suggestions and scope for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Migration

The extant literature mainly focuses on the analysis of factors influencing international migration and its impact on migrant households, regions and the economy. Migration studies have long grappled with gender as a structuring factor (Donato et al., 2006). Crenshaw (1991) provided an intersectional framework to understand the linkage between gender and migration. He alluded that it is difficult to comprehend gender without taking race, class, and other social aspects into account. Further, he argued that such factors expose women to the evils of structural violence, institutional neglect, and cultural silencing by intertwining with their roles as migrants. The extant literature portrayed migrants mainly as male laborers, while women were shown as passive dependents or “left-behind wives” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). However, feminist migration scholars questioned this androcentric narrative by presenting women as active economic agents, decision-makers, and community sustainers (Boyd & Grieco, 2003).

Recent studies focused on the “feminization of migration” revealed that the share of women in the global migration stream is increasing (Piper, 2013). While this phenomenon is viewed as a symbol of improved female autonomy, scholars caution that women’s migration trails are governed by qualitative and subjective factors such as gendered labor markets, care regimes, familial expectations, and cultural traits which are difficult to present quantitatively (Avila, 2002; Yeoh & Willis, 2005; Parreñas, 2015).

Feminization of Migration in India and Punjab

International migration is concentrated in a few Indian states like Kerala, Punjab, and Gujarat, which dominate the outbound flows (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). The migration context of Punjab is closely linked to its agrarian structure, socio-religious set-up, and global diaspora (Thandi, 2014). Punjab’s migration scene is mainly male-driven, with migrants engaged in labor-intensive occupations such as agriculture, construction, and trucking in destination countries. However, India has witnessed a slow but steady increase in female migration for both employment and education purposes

(Kaur, 2020). In the context of Punjab, this feminization of migration is principally related to the increasing role of education as an international migration tactic.

The extant literature shows that gender equality in migration remains a challenged and context-dependent outcome, particularly in Punjab. Migration can provide temporary spaces for women's autonomy, when male members migrate abroad, such autonomy is often controlled by patriarchal family structures. Kaur (2022) argued that left-behind women in Punjab witnessed varied experiences based on the household type, with women gaining more control over remittances and the decision-making process in nuclear families, while women are subjected to surveillance, restricted mobility, and subordination to in-laws in joint family set-ups. Migration ambitions in Punjab are guided by social and gendered hierarchies, which use women's academic accomplishments as a tool to facilitate male migration, particularly through strategic marriage alliances (Deshpande, 2020). Further, Kaur (2020) pointed out that the extra responsibilities assumed by left-behind women are viewed as burdens, not as symbols of empowerment, which not only increases the emotional stress but also harms their sense of identity. It shows broader patterns across South Asia, where the absence of men increases women's roles, but fails to question the fundamental patriarchal structures (Farooq & Kayani, 2014).

It is argued that control over remittances promotes women's empowerment as women who receive and manage the remittances independently show improved levels of agency (Kaur, 2022). However, in many cases, husbands maintain economic control remotely through joint accounts and daily monitoring via phone calls, thereby reasserting dominance from afar. The existing literature suggests that active participation in the household decision-making process fails to promote genuine empowerment due to various structural inequalities and cultural norms that dictate and limit women's autonomy in the migration process.

Studies highlight how families view student visas as steppingstones to permanent residency, with women's migration often strategically planned within kinship networks (Khosa, 2020). Consequently, Punjabi women's participation in international migration flows is consistently increasing, indicating gender equality. It also indicates the elimination of discrimination against women in the case of international migration, which was considered as males' task. Women were allowed to migrate with males on a permanent resident basis or invited afterwards male members got permanent resident status abroad (Singh, 2018). This paradigm shift in Punjab's migration

pattern, characterized by increasing participation of women, is really encouraging and intersects with SDG 5 and thus needs further exploration.

SDG 5 and Migration in Punjab's Context

While studies exist on Punjab's migration dynamics, few systematically examine the gendered dimensions of recent shifts toward study-based migration (Kaur & Singh, 2021). There is no empirical work linking these trends explicitly to SDG 5's targets, especially regarding whether increased female mobility equates to real gains in autonomy, participation, and access to economic resources. This paper fills this gap by examining the context of feminization of international migration in Punjab in the view of SDG 5.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an exploratory approach, drawing on primary data and qualitative fieldwork. Qualitative data were obtained through open-ended interviews with 14 migrant women from different districts of Punjab conducted between 2023 and 2024. Respondents were selected using snowball sampling. Respondents were identified through personal networks and subsequently approached to participate in semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview schedule used for case study interviews is provided in Appendix A. Respondents were not willing to share their experiences in the beginning. But they agreed on the condition that their personal information, particularly names, will not be shared with anyone. Consequently, all participant names used in the case narratives are hypothetical and have been anonymized through initials. For instance, if the name of any migrant was Navjot (a hypothetical name), it is represented as "NJ" while explaining the case narratives.

The study focuses on migration trends from 2005 to 2022, with particular emphasis on the post-2010 period, marking the rise in study-based migration. All the respondents interviewed under the study have migrated from 2005 to 2022. The study particularly examined alignment of feminization of Punjab's international migration with SDG 5 targets. Sustainable Development Goals positions gender equality (SDG 5) as central to global development (Soetan & Nguyen, 2023). SDG 5 aims to eliminate discrimination, ensure equal participation in leadership and economic life, and secure equal access to resources (Sen, 2019; Odera, 2020). Table 1 presents the description of targets to be achieved under SDG 5.

Women's migration is closely tied to SDG 5. It often shows deep-seated gender inequalities instead of real empowerment. Many female

migrants do not have control over their migration choices. They experience discrimination, exploitation, or abandonment, contradicting the Targets like 5.1, 5.2, and 5.5. Their roles are often limited to unpaid or low-paid work abroad, while their families control the income, violating targets 5.4 and 5.a. Cultural expectations and dependent visa statuses restrict access to reproductive rights and digital resources, which challenges targets 5.6 and 5.b. In the absence of policies that promote gender equality (5.c), women’s mobility may turn into another form of exploitation instead of true freedom. The present study evaluates whether observed trends contribute to achieving the targets of SDGs in case of women migration from Punjab.

Table 1
Targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5

Target	Target Description
5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
5.2	Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking and sexual exploitation.
5.3	Eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).
5.4	Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through public services and shared responsibilities.
5.5	Ensure full and effective participation and equal opportunities for women in leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.
5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights as agreed in international programs of action.
5.a	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, property, and control over land and financial services.
5.b	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment.
5.c	Adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Source: United Nations (2025).

GENDERED OUTCOMES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN PUNJAB THROUGH THE LENS OF SDG 5 FRAMEWORK

Case Study 1: The English-Proficient Brides Remain Financially Dependent

Migrant-AD (22 years old) from Moga and Migrant-SJ (20 years old) from Sangrur had similar stories. They completed their undergraduate degrees in Arts and Commerce, respectively. Both had no plans to study abroad, but relatives of a local family approached them. The sons of their respective families failed their IELTS exams multiple times. Recognizing the strong English skills of these two girls, the families arranged marriages between them and their sons. Migrant-AD obtained an Australian visa after four months of her marriage, whereas Migrant-SJ secured a student visa for Canada within six months of her marriage. Their in-laws paid their tuition and bore the whole migration costs. Once in Canada, Migrant-AD's husband joined her on a spousal open work permit. Migrant-AD attends college part-time and works long hours to cover the couple's expenses. She has little influence over her field of study and still depends on her husband's family for financial support. She feels pressured to stay in Canada to help her in-laws with their larger migration plan for permanent residency. Migrant-SJ has also faced almost similar situations in Australia. Her husband joined her on a spousal work permit. She joins the college part-time and also secured a job in a nearby restaurant and experienced long working hours along with study. At present, she is working for the permanent settlement of her family. Both these female migrants started earning on their own, but do not have full autonomy over their financial decisions. They are facing a similar status as they were facing at Punjab and are not looking for much difference in their economic and social status at destination countries.

These cases reveal that families use women's educational migration as an instrument to materialize their family migration plans. It indicates that the academic potential of female migrants was utilized by the family members, without considering the migrant's own willingness. These migrants have little freedom since they [NY2.1] (1) do not have a choice to select the discipline of their studies, (2) are dependent upon their husbands financially, and (3) have pressure on them to remain in the destination countries in order to obtain permanent residence. Economic inequity of men and women has been cleverly used to have an outward appearance of equality but not any effective implementation to establish equality for women. This demonstrates the contradiction between visible female mobility and the underlying

patriarchy, creating a contrast to the conclusions drawn under SDG 5 relating to empowerment.

Case Study 2: The Sacrificial Sister Supporting Her Brothers' Pursuit of Overseas Opportunities

Migrant-HS, aged 19, wanted to become a schoolteacher and was expecting a decent life in Punjab. But her family convinced her to apply for a study visa to Australia instead. Her brother had long aspired to move abroad but failed to clear language tests. Migrant-HS, who went to an English-medium school, cleared IELTS on her first attempt. She enrolled in a low-ranked private college with no interest in the program offered. Her brother migrated with her as her 'guardian' and began working full-time illegally. She now balances studies with multiple part-time jobs to support both. Her family expects her to remain abroad to sponsor her brother's future permanent residency and later bring their parents too. She is trying to invite [NY3.1] her brother abroad through sponsorship but could not be successful due to certain strict visa-related requirements in Australia.

This case narrative depicts that Migrant-HS's dream of becoming a teacher in Punjab was denied by her family, who instead routed her for migration to Australia. Here, the process of decision-making was governed by family priorities and gendered expectations, and the capacity of the migrant HS was prioritized for fulfilling the family goals. [NY4.1] In view of SDG Target 5.1, this reflects a subtle but persistent form of discrimination - her mobility was conditional, not autonomous. Although Migrant-HS earns money through part-time jobs, she doesn't control how that income is used. It goes toward supporting her brother and eventually sponsoring her family. She remains economically productive but not economically empowered. In view of SDG 5.a, the case of Migrant-HS does not exhibit gender equality in access to economic resources and control.

In Australia, Migrant-HS has become the primary breadwinner for her brother, who migrated under the guise of a "guardian" but now works illegally. She balances long study hours with multiple part-time jobs to cover their expenses. Her unpaid emotional and financial caregiving responsibilities mirror the invisible burden of domestic labor, transferred from home to abroad. This unpaid responsibility limits her academic focus and career progression. In view of SDG 5.4, Migrant-HS's unpaid care and domestic work have increased manifold without any recognition just due to being an elder sister and thus do not reflect empowerment or equalization viz a viz male, instead it has increased her instrumentalization to secure the economic prosperity of her family members.

Migrant-HS's enrollment in a low-quality private college-against her interest-demonstrates a lack of choice in academic or professional decision-making. While she is physically mobile and financially productive, she lacks agency in shaping her migration trajectory. Her role has been reduced to that of a logistical tool to facilitate her brother's future migration and, potentially, family reunification. Thus, in view of SDG 5.5, participation and opportunity for leadership and decision-making in migration decisions is indicative only and fails to achieve [NY5.1] the real objective of gender equality in decision-making.

Case Study 3: The Coerced Departure Fulfilling Family Expectations

Migrant-NZ excelled academically and dreamed of a career in India's civil services. Her parents, however, feared that she would become 'too old' to marry well if she stayed longer. They persuaded her to migrate to the UK on a study visa under the promise of 'better opportunities.' Migrant-NZ worked very hard and qualified for the language test within 8 months and secured a study visa for the United Kingdom. Migrant-NZ secured her admission to a college there. After a few months, she discovered that her college had poor accreditation and minimal support. Her in-laws could not bear the expenses of her education abroad. Therefore, she had to work as a cleaner at night to pay fees, while her fiancé joined her later and he started working under her dependent visa. Migrant-NZ is under immense pressure to continue paying tuition to maintain her legal status, despite wanting to return to India.

Migrant-NZ's case embodies instrumental gender equality-where a woman's capabilities are harnessed to serve family-centric migration goals. Her financial independence is restricted by exploitative circumstances. Moreover, her legal and emotional entrapment highlights the hidden structural inequalities that prevail beneath the mask of mobility. From this case, it also follows that some form of non-alignment has been reached with the SDG Goals 5.1, 5.5 and 5. a. All her vocational ambitions were subordinated to patriarchal marriage accords, violating Goal 5.1 (End Discrimination). The educational choices she made were not driven by her own aspirations, and her migration was externally induced, which contradicts Goal 5.5 (Participation and Leadership). Moreover, she supports her dependent spouse and visa status, which contradicts the aim of SDG 5.a (Access to Resources). Her case shows how important it is to critically examine gendered migration cases, particularly in analyzing how increased female mobility promotes gender equality and empowerment.

Case Study 4: The Daughter's Migration as a Family Strategy

Migrant-MP is a 21-year-old woman from a poor family, hailing from a village in the Moga district. Her father works as a daily wage laborer, her mother works as a farmhand during harvest seasons, while her two elder brothers are school dropouts and unemployed, working seasonally on others' farms or taking up odd jobs when available. Despite all hardships, Migrant-MP earned her BA degree from a government college and qualified for the IELTS exam. Her father financed her IELTS coaching classes by securing a loan against their small piece of ancestral land. Migration agents encouraged Migrant-MP's family to send her abroad on a student visa, presenting it as a strategy through which she could eventually sponsor her brothers and parents under family reunification programs. Her parents forced her to join a high-fee private college in Canada because it had an impeccable track record of visa approvals.

Migrant-MP's father financed her tuition by selling a portion of their land and borrowing heavily from a local moneylender. Migrant-MP is expected to find part-time work abroad, complete her course, secure permanent residency, and eventually sponsor her brothers, who see her migration as their ticket out. Although she aspired to become a teacher, her course does not match her interests; therefore, she now works night shifts in a convenience store to support her education and remit money home. She had no option but to stay abroad as a tool for her family's long-term migration plan.

Not using Migrant-MP's migration as an indicator of freedom but as a family strategy to support her unemployed brothers to end their generational poverty is a strategic case of gender equality. She had no option but to join an expensive, low-quality Canadian college merely for its visa success rate despite her being academically brilliant. Her financial and emotional labor abroad highlights the unpaid care burden traditionally forced on women, now extended transnationally. Though she is the primary income earner, she has no control over her resources, aligning poorly with SDG 5.a. Similarly, her lack of decision-making in choosing her course or destination undermines SDG 5.5, while the sidelining of her career ambitions due to male-centered family priorities reflects subtle but persistent discrimination in violation of SDG 5.1. Migrant-MP's mobility thus illustrates how increased female migration can mask deeper gender inequalities when women's success is used merely as a conduit for male benefit.

Case Study 5: Strategic Brides Securing Their Successful Migration with Unfair Means

Husband of Migrant-IN reported in the interview that he arranged a marriage with Migrant-IN through the network of agents. The marriage was executed with the terms and conditions that all the monetary expenditures of study-based migration of his counterpart will be borne by the family of Migrant-IN's husband. Everything went well and Migrant-IN migrated to Australia successfully. After her migration, she also demanded some money, which was sent to her. After six months of her migration, the husband of Migrant-IN pressed his wife to call him to Australia, but Migrant-IN stopped attending his calls and is now not in touch with him. He has reported this incident to the police. However, no meaningful action was taken in response to the complaint. This case shows how study-based migration has been used as a strategic tool by some female migrants for their successful migration abroad at the expense of their husbands' families. This is not the only case; many such cases are reported in newspapers. Several media reports documented that the deceived husbands protested before the Deputy Commissioner's office of their respective districts to seek justice against the forgery that happened with them.

In this case, a woman used her English skills and a marriage arrangement as a strategic tool for migration. Although it appears empowering, the reality reflects instrumental mobility, not genuine autonomy. Migrant-INs study visa was financed by her husband's family with expectations of family reunification. The fact that she cut off communication entirely with her husband and left him with no resources upon arriving in Australia goes against SDG 5.1, as such transactional marriages are structural inequalities. This further violates SDG 5.6, as her migration occurred through deception rather than informed consent. Even when the gender roles are reversed, marriage can be summed down to a commodity where exploitation continues, setting an example of how empowerment strategies are many a time misused within global migration circles.

Case Study 6: The Dual Burden of Aspirations and Obligations - The Story of Migrant-GL

Migrant-GL is a 23-year-old woman from Ludhiana. Her family convinced her to apply for a student visa to the UK, influenced by neighbors' successful migration rates, despite her aspiration of working in the public sector in India. To pay for her tuition, her father mortgaged the family home, expecting that Migrant-GL would obtain employment overseas and later help the family's migration. While official statistics portray Migrant-GL as

empowered, her migration was initiated more by family expectations than by her choice, because after moving to the UK, she encountered academic pressure, cultural isolation, and prolonged working hours while dealing with the pressure of constantly being reminded to repay her father's debt.

Migrant-GL's story challenges the common belief that migration empowers women. Her moving to the UK hides the pressure from her family to seem like a step forward. This totally goes against what SDG 5.1 states. Another aspect going against SDG 5.5 shows how she has no say in the decisions that are being made for her by her family, including what she studies, where she works, and even her aspirations. Despite being the primary earner in the household, Migrant-GL's case contradicts SDG 5.a, wherein she has very little control over her earnings. We hereby see how it cannot be termed as empowering when a woman's migration is more focused towards fulfilling family goals rather than her individual growth.

Case Study 7: The Exchange Bride - Migrant-JN's Forfeited Ambitions

Migrant-JN, from Gurdaspur. Despite wanting to pursue a career as a schoolteacher in India, her parents arranged her marriage to a man whose family was seeking an IELTS-qualified bride who could help them move abroad. Promising her quality education, her in-laws sponsored her visa and enrolled her in a diploma she had not chosen. She is currently working in a salon while financially supporting her husband's business as well as fulfilling monetary obligations back home. Despite being the primary applicant on her student visa, Migrant-JN has no control over money or major decisions, showcasing it as an example of women's migration being monetary arrangements merely for male-centric motives. This further violates SDG 5.6, which affirms women's right to make informed and autonomous choices about their futures by describing her move abroad as an opportunity to study while being mainly focused on serving her husband's plans. This also goes against SDG 5.1's commitment to eliminating gender-based discrimination.

Case Study 8: The Academic Performer with Invisible Autonomy - Migrant-RN's Dual Life.

Migrant-RN is a 22-year-old from Hoshiarpur. Unlike other cases, her migration was not forced, as she bagged admission to a Canadian university with a high IELTS score. However, after moving abroad, her independence gradually depleted through frequent monitoring by video calls, monetary expenditure, and the expectation of sponsoring her younger brother. Despite being academically confident and working long hours, Migrant-RN

has no say in her finances and the internships she could pursue due to the extreme expectations from her family.

Even when migration appears voluntary and empowering, Migrant-RN's case showcases how gendered expectations shape women's lives. It disregards SDG 5.4, which calls for the recognition and valuation of unpaid and emotional labor; despite being academically successful, she has to live under constant emotional monitoring and unspoken responsibilities of the family. It also shows how cultural norms can undermine SDG 5.c, which advocates policies that promote women's empowerment and autonomy. Although she has crossed the border, her freedom to build her own life remains tightly constrained.

Case Study 9: The Silent Resignation - Migrant-KL's Stalled Dreams

Migrant-KL is a 24-year-old from Bathinda who wanted to do a master's degree in psychology to build a career as a university lecturer in India. With family pressure and constantly being compared to her peers who have moved abroad, she enrolled in a two-year diploma course in hospitality in Canada that falls way below her academic capacity. In order to support her family, who mortgaged their home to pay for her tuition, she works around 30 hours a week at a local grocery store and sends money home.

Misaligning with SDG 5.5, Migrant-KL's story highlights the quieter form of gender inequality in migration because, even after being academically sound, she was forced to choose a diploma program that did not reflect her ambition. Her earnings are mainly spent on repaying the family's debt, which contradicts SDG 5.a. Although she is employed, her freedom is constrained, showing that migration neither means empowerment nor fulfils the objectives of SDG 5.

Case Study 10: The Invisible Migrant - Migrant-RN's Legal Shadow

With a migration agent handling her process, Migrant-RN, a 21-year-old, migrated to the UK using her cousin's student visa under pressure. Despite her documents being false, she was assured that it would not hinder her admission to a recognized college program. Upon arriving in the UK, she discovered that the paperwork was neither complete, nor was she eligible for enrollment. To avoid interactions with authorities, she works irregular shifts, as she is under constant fear of being deported. This was a result of her being left without any legal status.

Despite the precarious circumstances, Migrant-RN's family in Punjab not only expects financial support but also wants to ease her younger brother's migration. She embodies a hidden existence within the global

migration scene as she is visible through the remittances she sends, yet legally invisible within the formal protection framework. Her situation contradicts SDGs 5.1 and 5.6, as her undocumented status deprives her of fundamental rights, legal recognition, and agency over her migration trajectory. It further violates SDG 5.c, exposing the gap between policy commitments to gender equality and the lived realities of undocumented women. Migrant-RN's legal invisibility and social isolation highlight how migration dreams are imposed on young women without proper safeguards for their dignity, autonomy, or survival. Her case provides a critical insight that mobility without legal protection does not promote empowerment; instead, it increases vulnerability.

Case Study 11: The Reversal of Roles - Migrant-JL's Burden of Masculinity

Migrant-JL is a young woman from a lower-middle-class family in Kapurthala who moved to Australia on a student visa to improve her family's economic future while her husband is unemployed. He relies on the money that she sends home, making Migrant-JL the primary breadwinner, supporting herself, her husband and family back home. With hopes of joining her in the future, her husband regularly pressures her for money and expects her to secure permanent residency. With part-time studies, long working hours and constant responsibilities, her own plans have begun to fade.

Migrant-JL's case might look like women's empowerment and a reversal of traditional roles, but it is a mere shift in patriarchal pressure. She juggles both earning a living and family aspirations, as her husband cannot migrate. Her efforts and hardships are not recognized and valued, which contradicts SDG 5.4. Her migration contradicts the spirit of SDG 5.5, as her decisions were shaped by family pressure rather than personal ambition. Migrant-JL's story challenges the assumption that migration empowers women; instead, it is a new form of burdened femininity where role reversal does not translate into the reversal of inequality.

Case Study 12: The Bargained Bride - Migrant-GP's Dowry of Migration

Migrant-GP, a young woman from Malerkotla whose wedding fell apart after her husband, living in Canada, refused to proceed with the sponsorship of her spousal visa, despite agreeing that he would do so if her family covered all visa-related costs along with a dowry of Rs. 15 lakhs. He refused to do so because of vague claims of incompatibility. Now, Migrant-GP is in India with her marriage registration in dispute, burdened by both emotional betrayal and financial hardship.

Migrant-GP's migration was a part of a dowry arrangement rather than her own decision, making this case a specimen of how migration dreams get entangled with patriarchal marriage customs by leaving her with no say in her future. Violating SDG 5.1, her autonomy was repeatedly denied, which demands an end to discrimination against women, along with running against SDG 5.2, which seeks to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation against women. Migrant-GP's case shows a wider pattern where dowry is reframed as an 'investment' in migration, normalizing the treatment of women's lives as a source of upward mobility.

Case Study 13: The 'Visa Girl' Phenomenon - Migrant-HP's Labelled Identity

Migrant-HP is a 20-year-old from Gurdaspur who was termed a "visa girl" soon after she bagged a Canadian study visa, referring to it as a derogatory term used for a woman whose migration is leveraged for a man's advantage. The groom's family compelled her into marriage while simultaneously funding her education, treating her autonomy as a transactional tool to facilitate their son's future migration. This violates SDG 5.1 and SDG 5.5, as she has no say in her own migration path. Due to cultural pressure, she is unable to become empowered, which in turn regulates the aim of SDG 5.c. Her finances are supervised by her mother-in-law while she juggles her work and studies, along with managing her marriage. This has restricted her economic independence and constrained her social mobility. Migrant-HP's case is a perfect example of the demerits of patriarchal obligations and expectations, showing how international migration guises gender exploitation in the name of opportunities.

THE SYNTHESIS

The case's narrative presented in the study exhibited that families use English language proficiency as a strategic tool to execute successful migration of their male family members who are unable to qualify for a visa based on their own capabilities. Under these strategies, marriages are planned not for companionship but rather utilized to get a student visa for facilitating family-sponsored migration. All this happens without the apparent consent of the young women in many cases or with forced consent under familial expectations and established cultural norm which absolutely or partially sideline the genuine autonomy of women in decision-making.

Women's freedom through international mobility, which seems fascinating in numbers, often becomes artificial under such conditions, as it conceals layers of economic dependency, constrained educational choices and

limited personal agency. This instrumental use of women's agency blurs the line between empowerment and exploitation, as women's mobility becomes a conduit for fulfilling male migration aspirations. Migration, in such contexts, becomes less an act of empowerment and more a strategy for collective familial advancement, with the woman serving as the conduit. Each case complements and deepens the emerging narrative that Punjab's feminization of migration, while visible, remains largely instrumental, coercive, and contradictory to the ideals of SDG 5.

The discussed case narratives confirm violations of SDG 5 in the case of women's migration from Punjab. Though these narratives exhibit different specifications, they present a similar pattern: migration of women does not increase their empowerment; instead, it leads to their instrumental role in the process of male migration. All the case narratives involve violations of SDG 5 across the migration decision-making, access to economic resources, leadership participation and unpaid work recognition. In a nutshell, the narratives establish that simply moving to a new place does not automatically lead to women's empowerment; instead, real empowerment carries control of migration decisions, access to economic resources and a fair say in shaping their own futures.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the gender dynamics of international migration from Punjab in view of SDG 5. It presented a quite paradoxical situation within the narrative of improvement in the status of women in Punjab's migration scenario. It broke the myth established based on rising participation of Punjabi women migrating abroad for education and employment and revealed that this quantitative feminization of migration reflects instrumental rather than emancipatory gender equality. The mobility of women in many cases was utilized as a tool of patriarchal migration strategies in which the educational credentials and language proficiency of migrant women work as an instrument to secure migration for male family members.

This quantitative migration feminization appeared to reproduce existing structural inequalities between males and females that often benefit male aspirations while rendering women's agency conditional and contingent. Examining this phenomenon through the lens of SDG 5, the study reveals that the feminization of migration in Punjab since 2010 involves violations of SDG 5 across migration decision-making, access to economic resources, leadership participation, and unpaid work recognition. This trend signifies

quantitative women's empowerment but fails to capture the qualitative dimensions of migration feminization.

To bring migration governance in line with the spirit of SDG 5, the policy interventions should address the fundamental socio-economic and socio-cultural mechanisms that cause instrumental gender inequality. The gender sensitive policies and support system must be introduced and implemented effectively to ensure safe and empowering migration experiences for females. There is a dire need to curb the role of migration consultants and marriage brokers by strict monitoring to stop exploitative practices. The host countries may come forward and provide support services, including financial literacy, legal aid, and protection from visa dependency exploitation, for international female students. India's migration policy should integrate gender audits to ensure that women's migration is voluntary and empowering rather than instrumental. Reducing over-reliance on migration requires expanding quality education and employment opportunities within Punjab to lessen the perceived necessity of sending daughters abroad.

The study directs that future research must be conducted on the long-term socio-economic effects of women's migration under these arrangements. It also engenders the need to examine the effects of women's migration on the male dependents to achieve a better understanding of the family strategies. Future research must also be conducted to explore the impact of changes in the regulations governing international students in the developed countries on the gender dynamics of migration from Punjab.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule Used for Case Study Interviews

Title of the Study: Feminization without Empowerment? Evidence on Gendered Outcomes of International Migration in Punjab through the Lens of SDG 5 Framework

Informed Consent Statement

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. The purpose of the research has been explained to you, and all information provided will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any stage without any consequences. By participating in this interview, you indicate your informed consent to take part in this study.

Section I: Socio-Demographic Profile

- Age: _____
- District of Origin in Punjab: _____
- Educational Qualification: _____
- Marital Status: _____
- Destination Country: _____
- Current Visa Status: _____

Section II: Migration Decision-Making

- Did you independently decide to migrate abroad?
- What were your personal aspirations before migration?
- Describe the reasons behind your migration.

Section III: Education and Career Aspirations

- Did you have freedom to choose the course of your own interests and destination country?
- Are you satisfied with your current educational program?

Section IV: Economic Empowerment and Financial Autonomy

- Are you currently employed while studying or residing abroad?
- Are you free to decide how your income is spent?
- Do you believe migration improved your economic independence?

Section V: Family Responsibilities and Care Burden

- Has migration increased your family responsibilities?
- Do you feel responsible for helping other family members migrate abroad?
- How has migration affected your personal well-being and work-life balance?

Section VI: Gender Equality and Autonomy (SDG 5 Dimensions)

- Have you experienced pressure to migrate because of family expectations?
- Do you have independent access to bank accounts and financial resources?
- Were marriage and migration decisions made with your free and informed consent?
- Have you ever felt compelled to continue migration despite wanting to return home?

Section VII: Migration Outcomes

- Has migration improved your social status?
- Has migration improved your decision-making power within the family?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your migration experience?