# The life of migrant workers in Chinese cities

The Chinese urban labor force is constituted largely by workers from other regions of the country other than the cities in China. The labor force is majorly formed by individuals who migrate from the rural areas to urban areas in search of employment. Various issues surround the migrant workers employed in the cities of China. The migrant workers have many social and economic contributions in the different cities of China where they work. The growing Chinese economy has attracted rurally based individuals into moving to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. Different research articles provide information on the lives of migrant workers in China. The life of this group of individuals focuses on the population, lifestyles, issues, cultures and their economic and financial contribution. The level in a population of migrant workers in China has increased over the years due to the increase in employment opportunities.

## Population and patterns of migrant workers in China

The population of migrant workers in China has increased over the years due to the rise of employment opportunities in China’s urban centers. In 2010, statistics indicated that the population of China's migrant workers was higher than the previous statistics on migrant workers. The population of the migrant workers was approximately 221million people. The population of migrant workers has increased annually ever since. The growing Chinese economy has attracted rural based individuals into moving to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. The population of the migrant workers constituted 16.5% of the total population in Chinese cities at that time. It is approximated that 13million rural based individuals move to cities from their rural homes in search of employment opportunities and economic resources (Bellwood, 2011). Researchers and analysts predict that the annual inflow of migrants into Chinese cities will be over 300million individuals annually by 2025. In 2011, Andrew Jacobs stated that the migrant workers in the urban areas of China constitute almost half of China's labor force. He stated that the capital city of China had approximately 19.6 million residents from rural areas.

The migrant workers provide cheap labor to the companies in the urban areas of China. The labor force is majorly constituted by individuals who migrate from the rural areas to urban areas in search of employment. Though the high inflow of workers from rural areas portrays the presence of poverty in rural areas, China's cities cannot survive without the migrant workers. The increased inflow of the migrant workers into urban areas has increased the human populations of the Chinese cities. The population of internal migrants exceeds the population of the original residents of some Chinese cities. According to the China Economic Review in 2014, the population of migrants in the city of Shanghai exceeded the population of the original residents of the city. The population of migrants in Shanghai was seven hundred thousand in 2014 while that of original residents was 640,000 according to China Economic Review journal (Dyer, 2008).

The companies, organizations and institutions in the Chinese cities are always in search of cheap labor so that they can minimize their operational expenses such as salaries and wages of employees. The migrant workers are distributed unevenly over the cities of China. The migrants that work in the capital city and other highly developed cities do not live in the cities due to the high cost of living in the cities. Casual laborers specifically cannot be able to sustain their lives in the capital city and the suburbs of China. The workers resort to cheap housing in the outskirts of the cities. Most migrant workers are employed in the cities of Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen. The cities in the coastal regions, of the country have attracted a lot of workers from rural areas due to the increased levels of resources and employment opportunities in the coastal region.

The high industrialization level in China especially in the urban areas has created many employment opportunities that sometimes exceed the population of qualified workers available in the cities. The uneven distribution of the industrialization has led to development of urban areas and underdevelopment of the rural areas. The existence of a few companies in the rural areas hence few employment opportunities and economic resources for the residents of rural areas. The unequal distribution of resources is the main reason industries are mostly located in the urban areas rather than the rural areas and other underdeveloped regions of the country. According to journals on the anthropology of China, the migrants move into the cities together with their families and this further increase the population of urban areas. Their children grow up and get engaged in the Chinese cities' labor force.

## Impact of Migrant workers in Chinese cities

## Economic Impact

The Migrant workers contribute a lot to the GDP of the country. The level of migrant workers' income per capita has been increasing continuously over the years. The workers are significant consumers of the products and services available in urban areas. The workers spend the largest portion of their incomes on accessing products and services. According to the East Asia Forum by Wang, the annual average per capita consumption of migrant workers in China is 8,627 Yens. The product consumption level of the migrant workers is 37.6% of the total product consumption level of the Chinese cities. The service consumption level of the migrant workers is 47.9% of the total service consumption level of the Chinese cities. Though the per capita consumption of the migrants is lower than that of urban residents it contributes a lot to the country's economy. Wang in his article of 2015, states that if the salaries and wages of the migrant workers are to be increased slightly their per capita consumption will increase greatly.

## Social Impact

The presence of migrant workers in Chinese cities has a great influence on the social structures of the cities. The increase of migrant workers in China has increased the level of discrimination among Chinese citizens living in the cities. According to Grant in 2008, the reception of migrant workers by native residents in the urban societies is poor and their rights are not prioritized. The Hukou rules, regulations and policies against discrimination among Chinese citizens have not eliminated the level of discrimination that migrant workers are subjected to (Flora Yu, 2009).

The high presence of migrant workers in Chinese cities has led to the cities' cultural diversity. The migrant workers come from different geographical regions that have different cultures. The diversity of culture in the city results to exchange of cultural values and beliefs. In contrast to the positive perception of cultural exchange, it has led to the moral decay among individuals. Different cultures are associated with different moral values that are either good or bad. According to Zhang, the risk of HIV contraction among female migrants working in entertainment places in China has increased greatly. Zhang claims that of the 5,365 cases of HIV contraction in the city of Beijing in the year 2011, most were internal Chinese migrants. The migrants accounted for 75% of HIV contraction cases in the city of Beijing in 2011.

## Issues and challenges surrounding the lives of migrant workers in China

Migrant workers face various issues with while working the cities of China. The issues range from social to economic issues. The rigid citizen registration system of China promotes difficulties in the adoption of rural-urban migrants in urban areas. China's urban environment is not very favorable for the migrant workers and this has created the issues that the workers are faced with. The migrant workers are exposed to low standard domestic and working environments due to the lack of prioritization of their welfare, grievances and rights.

## Poor working conditions

The China Labor Bulletin indicates that migrant workers in the cities of China are exposed to a poor working environment and are poorly compensated for their work. The journal states that in the year 2015 migrant workers worked for 26 days per month and this was excess work time as compared to the other workers. The journal indicates that in the year 2015 the migrant workers worked more than 44 hours as compared to their counterparts. The increased working duration was as a result lack of formal employment contracts between the workers and the companies that hired them. The China Labor Bulletin states that the Labor Contract Law of China requires all employees to sign formal agreements with their employers (Li, 2008). According to the journal it is only 36% of the total number of migrants that had formal contracts with their employers. The number of migrant workers with formal employment contracts had decrease from the previous year. The statistics on the migrant employees with formal job contracts in 2014 was 38% and this reduced by 1.8% in 2015.

The migrant workers especially casual laborers are not provided with safety measures in their daily operations. Employment formal contracts ensure that employees’ safety is guaranteed but since most migrant workers do not have job contracts their safety at work is not guaranteed. Many migrant workers in manufacturing companies are not provided with appropriate clothing for their work. The lack of proper clothing exposes them to occupational hazards.

## Insufficient financial benefits

Most of the migrant workers in China receive low salaries and wages as compared to other workers. The migrant workers work for longer durations than other employees but are paid less salaries and wages than other workers. The migrant workers receive poor compensation for their services to the employers during their working durations and afterwards. Most of the migrant workers are not entitled to pensions by their employers after they retire. The Migrant Worker Survey in 2015 stated that the number of migrant workers who were paid financial arrears by their employers in 2014 were approximately 2.7million workers. This number of workers constituted only 1% of the total migrants working in Chinese cities.

The Migrant Worker Survey states that construction companies in Chinese cities are the main occupational offenders by not paying the migrant employees sufficient salaries and wages. The construction industry pays migrant employees lower salaries as compared to any other sector in the country. According to the survey, the number of migrant workers that were entitled to pension after retirement was only 16.4%. In 2014, migrant workers who were provided with healthcare insurance coverage by their employers constituted only 18.2% of the total population of migrants employed in Chinese cities. The migrant workers have to pay for healthcare services with their salaries and wages since their employers do not pay for healthcare insurance policies of the migrant workers. The payment of insurances by themselves reduces their financial capabilities further since a significant proportion of their salaries are spent in accessing medical services. The healthcare insurance premiums of workers who are native residents of the cities are pad for their. A great proportion of urban native workers have occupational contractual bindings with their employers.

## Poor housing

The review establishes that due to low wages and salaries that migrant workers are paid by their employers, they are unable to afford to live in high end or standard environments. The workers cannot be able to live in the cities they work in since the cost of living and housing is high. The China Economic Review states that in the year 2013 the cost of housing and land in the city of Shanghai rose by 20% from the previous year (Arianna, 2015). The wages and salaries of the migrant workers living in Shanghai had only risen by 13% according to statistics provided by the review. The increment in the cost of houses and rent was higher than the salary increment of the migrant workers. The workers henceforth were and are still unable to afford the rent of houses in the cities. The migrant workers resort to substandard houses in the outskirts of the city. Most of the migrant workers live in slum areas of the cities where the houses are cheap. The slums are faced with poor sanitation levels.

## Discrimination of the migrant workers by native residents and workers

The low salaries and wages that migrant workers gain reduce their financial capabilities. Financial incapability reduces the social status of individuals. The workers are unable to adopt the cities' lifestyles especially due to the high living standards in the cities of China. The capital city of China, Beijing has very high standards as compared to any other city in China. The workers in the capital city cannot be able to fit in the society effectively due to the difference in salary levels between them and the cities native residents. According to the Migrant Labor Survey, migrant workers are discriminated against and despised by the native residents and workers of the cities where they work (Harjeet, 2008). Their children are discriminated against by other children at home and in school.

## Solutions to the issues and challenges facing migrant workers in China

The government through the ministry of Labor has coordinated with other labor agencies in the country to protect the rights of workers. Even though the government is focused on improving the welfare of all workers it has not prioritized grievances of migrant workers. Labor unions and human activists in the country insist that appropriate, reliable and sustainable solutions towards the migrant workers' challenges should be established and implemented appropriately. The government of China through the ministry of labor and labor agencies in the country should combine efforts in improving the economic, domestic and social welfare of migrant employees.

## Amendment of China's national registration system

The registration system of China is rigid and does not allow individuals to change their localities of residence easily. Individuals are not allowed to change their residences even if they migrate to another region in the country. Labor unions and human activists emphasize that the policies and laws governing the registration system should be reviewed to allow free movement of individuals within the country. China's citizens should be allowed to move within the country freely either for search of employment or for other purposes. Shaohua in his article "Change for policies" emphasizes that the system of registration should allow individuals to change their areas of residence easily. The migrant workers should be prioritized by the government and private employers similar to native residents especially when they settle permanently in different Chinese cities.

## Strengthening Labor Unions

The domination of labor unions in the country's labor sector has decreased over the years due to suppression from the government and private employers. The government should collaborate with labor unions to empower migrant workers and promote their occupational rights. The Migrant Worker Survey of 2015 emphasizes that labor unions are the key influencers on the uplifting of migrant workers living and working standards.

## Gender mainstreaming

Female and male migrants have different access levels of employment opportunities and economic resources. The occupational rights of female migrant workers should be upheld by the private employers and the government. Migrant males have a higher chance of getting employed by public or private companies in Chinese cities than their female counterparts due to gender difference between them. Labor unions emphasize that women should empower the government or gender advocacy agencies in the China. Women empowerment programs for female migrant workers will motivate them to engage themselves in the formal employment sector of the country. The empowerment programs will enable them to know and understand their occupational rights better. According to Tanshen, migrant female workers in China were more vulnerable to occupational offenses than their male counterparts in the year 2013. The government of China should provide equal opportunities to both the female and male migrants working in the cities of China.

Research establishes the impact and influence that the inflow of migrant workers into Chinese cities has on the social and economic status of the cities and China in general. Presence of migrant workers in Chinese cities has social and economic impacts. Migrant workers face different challenges while living and working in the cities of China. Workers in different cities are faced with different issues and problems from those in other cities. The issues are based on the working and domestic environments that the migrant workers are exposed. The workers are exposed to low standard domestic and working environments due to the lack of prioritization of their welfare, grievances and rights. Solutions to solve the challenges faced by migrant workers have been established but have not been fully implemented. The government of China through the ministry of labor and other labor agencies in the country should join efforts to ensure migrant workers' welfare and rights are upheld.

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