

Building the future? For whom? Migrant female construction workers and the capacity to aspire in Bangalore

Becky Bowers discusses her research, which will seek to address the darker and often unheard counter narratives to 'Bangalore rising' by exploring the experiences of female construction workers in India's tech capital.

Lauded as India's 'city of the future', Bangalore is being remade according to technocratic vision. However, with its frequent water and electricity shortages, diminishing green spaces and traffic jams that have become the stuff of legend, the city has become enmeshed within a series of competing public discourses. These often paradoxical narratives incorporate both nostalgia for the 'garden city' of the past, and aspirations for a futuristic technopolis. What are the implications of these debates for those unable to participate in them? Who is responsible for building the city of the future and to whom does this vision belong?

The hierarchal nature of the global knowledge economy means that informal and manual workers are often overlooked as co-contributors. This obfuscation has considerable socioeconomic implications for the non-elite citizens of Bangalore as various sources (see, for example, Gopalan 2011, Narayanareddy 2011 or Nair 2005) have illustrated. Subaltern citizens are often discounted from the design, accessibility and democracy of the city. The demand for IT parks, shopping malls, and gated developments create off-limit areas for the urban poor, whilst simultaneously encroaching on their living space.

Through their acts of consumption, engagement with civic authorities and the very buildings they live and work in, migrant IT workers have a highly visible presence and impact upon the landscape and evolution of contemporary Bangalore. However, the presence of thousands of migrant construction workers who are physically building the hi-tech city largely goes unnoticed. The fact that [only 25,000 of Bangalore's 600,000 construction workers](#) are officially registered within Karnataka state highlights this invisibility.



Woman labourer, Bangalore. Image credit: Flickr/[Nicolas Mirguet](#)

Construction workers from the poorer northern states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar constitute some of the most severely marginalised members of this substantial workforce. In comparison to local workers they are paid lower wages at a lesser frequency and assigned riskier projects on high-rise buildings. With no formal

identification or permanent address, they experience considerable obstacles accessing civic amenities. Sometimes Biharis and workers from UP may even become a target for political and physical [violence by pro-Kannadiga groups](#). My doctoral project seeks to establish the forms of mobility that urban life and networks may facilitate for migrant workers and their families. By focusing on migrant female construction workers from northern India, one of the most excluded groups within the city, I shall address the darker and often unheard counter narratives to 'Bangalore rising'.

The low-status jobs of female construction workers entail breaking stones, sweeping, carrying head-loads, fetching water and mixing cement. They face the additional burden of the demands placed on them as wives and mothers, as their families often migrate with them due to the lack of adequate nutrition and support networks in the villages they leave behind. Female construction workers are predominantly perceived as supplemental labour to their husbands or male kin, who negotiate and often receive their wages. These transactions devalue female contributions, inhibiting prospects of securing a higher salary. They are also attributable to commonly held beliefs in the industry that women lack the requisite skills and strength for learning a trade, meaning there is scant opportunity for career progression. How might the realities and restrictions of construction work influence the aspirations of female workers? How do they perceive their role in building the 'city of the future'?

Over the next 18 months I will explore how women in the construction industry engage with these issues and experience urban life in Bangalore; focusing on how the processes of marginalisation and migration both expand and diminish their aspirations and associated pathways of social and economic mobility. I will investigate how the capacity to aspire is shaped by migration, and the ways in which it is strengthened or impeded for migrant women by following their navigations through the worksite, the city, and family life. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of habitus (1977) and cultural capital (1979), the capacity to aspire is understood as a 'navigational ability' which is determined by class and wealth. While recognising that the poor may have less capacity to aspire, my research will look closely at the changing qualities of aspirations as this variation is a possibility largely omitted from anthropological studies of gender and rural to urban migration.

The lived experiences of female construction workers in urban environments requires further scrutiny due to the growing debate regarding the navigation of public spaces by women and girls in India. This has become increasingly voiced via [women's rights groups](#), [protests](#), and heightened news coverage of sexual assaults. The lack of concern about migrant workers within this public discourse raises significant questions regarding access to democracies of space (and time), and the political capital available to members of a highly mobile subaltern population. Given the scale of interstate labour migration across India, anthropologists of South Asia must address why women migrate and who they seek to become through migration. Further, given the symbolic and economic capital of cities such as Bangalore, it is important that we scrutinise how those working in informalised livelihoods perceive their role in the creation of India's hi-tech metropolises, and their participation in the wider global knowledge economy.

About the Author

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