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Linking Internal Migration to SDGs Achievement: A Manipur Perspective

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Abstract

Migration has been increasingly recognised as an economic phenomenon that contributes to the development of both the origin and the destination. Moving to cities may help in achieving several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like 'no poverty', 'quality education', 'gender equality', 'decent work' and 'economic growth' etc. It is against this backdrop that the article makes an attempt to examine the relations between migration and sustainable development emphasising particularly on migration's role in achieving the SDGs. Drawing on primary data collected from Pangal migrants in Imphal city – primarily engaged in informal sector livelihoods or pursuing education – the present study employs optimistic theories of migration and Women in Development (WID) approach. The study argues that migration brings about not only progress and development in the origin and destination but also gender equality owing to increasing participation of women in work force and equal access to quality education for boys and girls among the migrants in the city.

Keywords: Migration, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), *Pangals*, Manipur, Imphal city

Introduction

Migration, although has unwanted and unanticipated repercussions, has been increasingly recognized as a means to achieve progress and development not only for the migrants but also in the places of origin and destination implying its close link with development. This linkage has been explored and asserted by a number of global initiatives and organisations like Global Commission on International migration, the United Nations High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in September 2006, the Global Forum on Migration and Development in July 2007 in Brussels as well as International Labour Organisation (ILO).

During 1970s and 80s there has been a paradigm shift of 'development' to 'sustainable development' recognising the need for the integration of economic development, environmental protection, and social justice and inclusion. Since then, organisations like United Nations have been organising and instituting a wide range of programmes, institutions and international agreements with the aim of achieving global sustainable development. In the United Nations summit held in September, 2015, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development was adopted and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were set to be achieved (United Nations, n.d.). The Agenda recognises migration as a powerful driver of sustainable development, both for the migrants and their communities (International Organisation for Migration, n.d.). Thus, migration could be playing its role in achieving various SDGs viz. reducing poverty, gender equity, quality education, clean water and sanitation, decent work and economic growth. It is in this context that the paper tries to explore the various linkages between migration and sustainable development emphasising on the roles played by it in achieving the various abovementioned SDGs using primary sources of data collected from migrants belonging to *Pangal* community in Imphal city.

About the *Pangal* community

Pangals who are officially recognised as *Meitei-Pangals* are one of the ethnic groups in Manipur speaking Manipuri as their primary language and practising Islam as their faith. Therefore, they are Manipuri speaking Muslims who primarily reside in valley regions in modern-day Manipur, although a sizeable Diasporas have settled in parts of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh (Khan, 2012). *Pangals* together with other Muslims in the state constitute 8.4 per cent of the total population of Manipur¹ and reside primarily in the villages of the valley districts albeit, small localities in Imphal city like Golapti, Hatta and Mantripukhri are also being inhabited dominantly by them. Since recent decades, there has been rapid migration to these urban localities from villages and now becoming favourite destinations of intra-state rural urban migration among people of this community in Manipur.

Pangals are grouped into *shageis* (clans) and the members of a *shagei* are related by blood (Singh, 1986, as cited in Irene, 2010). A *shagei* is composed of many families. The social life of *Pangals* is more or less the same with *Meities/Meeteis* (the majority community of Manipur) who also primarily reside in the valley regions. What distinguishes *Pangals* from *Meiteis/Meeteis* is the religion² they follow. *Pangals* are also organised into *singlup*, a closely-knit group of the members of a *shagei* or *shageis*, for executing various activities on auspicious occasions like wedding or death rituals or a feast. The members of a *singlup* are bound together in mutual assistance, and feed and house kins and relatives coming from distant areas (Shah, 1994). Furthermore, community members possess a strong ethos of mutual aid during both prosperous and challenging life events. This communal solidarity is particularly evident during weddings, where the entire village mobilizes to support the host family by offering monetary and in-kind contributions, alongside providing voluntary labour

¹ Census of Indian, 2011

² *Meiteis/Meeteis* follow either Hinduism or *Sanamahism* or Christianity (since recent times)

for the event's logistical arrangements (Choudhury, 1989). Although *Shari'at* (Islamic law) does not explicitly prohibit intra-clan marriage, the *Pangals* rigidly observe endogamous boundaries at the *shagei* (clan) level, treating intra-*shagei* unions as strict cultural taboos. Historically, this socio-cultural prohibition was heavily reinforced by the Kings of Manipur, who legally banned such practices and institutionalised severe punishments for violators (Irene *op. cit.*).

Representing nearly half of the total Pangal population in Manipur, the status of these women is often framed within broader discourses of marginalisation. Scholars like Azim (1997) argue that Muslim women face systemic disadvantages across various social spheres compared to women of other faiths. Traditional patriarchal structures discourage them from seeking employment outside the domestic domain to avoid gender-mixed environments. Thus, when women do enter the workforce and confront subsequent social stigma or humiliation, it is generally an act of sheer economic survival. While Islamic jurisprudence grants women equal status to men, the lived reality of Pangal women in Manipur is heavily mediated by patriarchal structures (Irene, *op. cit.*). Because the husband functions as the undisputed head of the family, wives typically defer to their supervision and seek explicit permission before making key decisions. This friction highlights how gender parity is effectively hindered by local traditions, social norms, and institutionalized limitations on women's physical autonomy (*ibid.*).

Theoretical framework, materials and research methods

The present study examines the nexus between migration and sustainable development, focusing specifically on how human migratory patterns facilitate the achievement of various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within academic discourse, the developmental impact of migration is characterized by significant theoretical divergence. Neoclassical theorists and developmentalists adopt an optimistic paradigm, whereas cumulative causation and 'migrant syndrome' theorists offer a more pessimistic critique. Illustrating the former, neoclassical theory conceptualizes migration as an equilibrium-seeking mechanism that mutually benefits both sending and receiving regions (Lewis, 1954). Similarly, developmentalist literature from the 1950s and 1960s positions return migrants as vital agents of innovation and systemic change, arguing that they inject financial remittances, novel ideas, and entrepreneurial mindsets back into their communities of origin (de Haas, 2010).

In response to this stark polarization, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) framework emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, positing that migratory processes can simultaneously yield both positive and negative developmental outcomes. Rooted in NELM, the livelihood approach conceptualizes migration as a strategic household decision aimed at diversifying income streams, mitigating risks, and securing long-term livelihood improvements (*ibid.*). Positioned against this theoretical backdrop, this study evaluates the empirical role of migration primarily through an optimistic developmental framework.

To analyse the intersection of human mobility and gender transformation, this study utilizes the Women in Development (WID) framework, particularly intersecting with modern fourth-wave feminist paradigms that comment on gendered norms and the structural marginalization of women. The WID model explicitly underscores women's productive capacities and their active engagement in income-generating mechanisms (Moser, 1993). Central to this framework is the equity approach, which identifies economic independence, formal employment, and productive roles as the primary catalysts for female empowerment. This is complemented by the anti-poverty approach, which isolates the reduction of gender-based income disparities and stresses women's operational agency in poverty alleviation (*ibid.*). Consequently, the present study explicates how migration mitigates poverty and scales back gender inequality by assessing the economic upward mobility of migrants – specifically women – engaged in productive, income-earning activities. Methodologically, this study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design grounded in empirical fieldwork conducted across three distinct localities in Imphal: Hatta, Golapti, and Mantripukhri. Primary data were collected through a triangulation of field observations, structured interviews, and schedule techniques. Utilizing a purposive sampling technique, a sample size of 150 migrants was selected to form the core analytical cohort of this research.

Migration of *Pangals*

In recent years, the internal migration of *Pangals* from rural peripheries to urban enclaves within Imphal city – specifically Hatta, Golapti, and more recently, Mantripukhri – has accelerated rapidly, generating widespread socio-economic consequences. This demographic shift is not driven by a singular, uniform catalyst; rather, it is precipitated by a multifaceted interplay of economic, social, and demographic pull-and-push factors. Crucially, the intensity and nature of these drivers vary significantly based on individual socio-demographic characteristics, including age-sex composition, marital status, occupational profile, educational attainment, household size, and geographical point of origin (Connell et al., 1976; Narain, 1972).

Socio-Demographic Profile of Migrants

The empirical data presented in Table 1 outlines the percentage distribution of Pangal migrants disaggregated by sex and age cohort. The sample exhibits a pronounced gender asymmetry, with males constituting the vast majority at 89.33 per cent. In terms of age distribution, a plurality of the total respondents (39.33 per cent) fall within the 35-50 age bracket. Conversely, the economically dependent cohorts – defined here as the elderly (above 60 years) and early youth (under 25 years) – comprise 3.33 per cent and 14 per cent of the sample, respectively. Within the under-25 category, migrants are predominantly students navigating rural-to-urban pathways for educational advancement. Crucially, a distinct demographic nuance emerges among female respondents: 50 per cent of all female migrants belong to the under-25 age cohort, indicating a highly youthful female migratory trend. Marital status acts as a critical structural determinant of migration patterns, given that shifting familial responsibilities dictate geographic mobility. Evaluating the correlation between migratory distance and marital life, Singh (1985) notes that married individuals

bearing heavier domestic obligations often prefer shorter-distance migration to facilitate frequent family visits. As illustrated in Table 2, 78 per cent of the surveyed migrants are married, followed by single individuals at 18.66 per cent. Divorced and widowed categories represent a small fraction of the cohort, accounting for 0.66 per cent and 2.66 per cent, respectively. However, gender-disaggregated analysis reveals a sharp contrast to the male pattern: 62.50 per cent of female migrants are single, compared to just 13.43 per cent of their male counterparts. Additionally, the proportion of widowed individuals is significantly higher among women, constituting 25 per cent of the total female migrant sample.

Determinants of Migration: Push and Pull Dynamics

To conceptualize the motivational drivers underlying this demographic shift, this study draws upon Everett Lee's Push-Pull Theory. Table 3 details the distribution of primary factors motivating Pangal migration to Imphal city. The field data identifies employment generation, job seeking, and the establishment or expansion of personal enterprises as the predominant economic catalysts. Urban pull factors are characterized by robust economic opportunities within the informal sector, superior educational infrastructure, and centralized healthcare facilities in Imphal. Conversely, rural push factors are rooted in systemic agricultural issues, including poverty, rural underemployment, depressed agricultural incomes, and seasonal unemployment within home villages. Imphal city's expansive informal economy serves as a major entry point for Pangal migrants, allowing them to initiate small-scale enterprises with minimal bureaucratic barriers. Consequently, Table 4 indicates that a significant proportion (41.33 per cent) of the respondents have turned to self-employment within the informal sector, engaging in activities such as tailoring, retail shopkeeping, auto-rickshaw driving, manual rickshaw pulling, butchery, operating tea stalls, and street vending. Consistent with established literature (e.g., Caldwell, 1969; Roussel, 1970), educational aspiration emerges as a primary institutional driver, accounting for 27.33 per cent of total migration (Table 3). This trend highlights structural deficits in rural Manipur, where Pangal-concentrated villages seldom possess secondary schools extending beyond the 10th standard, thereby concentrating higher educational infrastructure within the state capital. The presence of premier schools, colleges, and specialized coaching centers for national competitive examinations—such as NEET-UG and engineering entrances, alongside state and central civil services exams (MPSC and UPSC)—creates a powerful pull for both students and aspiring candidates. Notably, education serves as the overarching driver for female mobility, accounting for 68.75 per cent of all female migration.

Contextualizing Self-Employment and Structural Barriers

Ultimately, Pangal migration is driven by a combination of rural structural distress –such as declining agricultural productivity due to mechanization and severe land fragmentation – and the urban pull of Imphal's informal sector, health infrastructure, and educational avenues. Crucially, the formal private sector in Manipur remains severely underdeveloped due to weak industrialization and persistent transport and communication bottlenecks that restrict large-scale commercial markets. Consequently, public sector employment remains the primary avenue for upward mobility, evidenced by over 700,000 job seekers registered

with the state's employment exchange (Government of Manipur, 2009). This hyper-competition has driven rent-seeking behaviours, with some aspirants resorting to paying substantial bribes to officials to secure state patronage. Given these formidable structural barriers and the historically marginalized socio-economic baseline of the community (Government of Manipur, 2004), self-employment in the urban informal economy functions as a critical, pragmatic survival strategy for the Pangal population.

Migrant Trajectories and Sustainable Development Outcomes

Migration serves as a powerful driver of sustainable development, yielding substantial socio-economic benefits for both mobile populations and host communities (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). Consequently, well-managed migration plays a pivotal role in advancing several of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that a significant majority of economic migrants experienced upward economic mobility following their relocation to Imphal. Conversely, a distinct minority encountered financial stagnancy or struggled to keep pace with the escalating economic demands of their households. Urban migration to Imphal provided these individuals with access to diverse socio-economic opportunities, significantly improving their overall living standards. Engaging in diverse income-generating activities allowed the majority of participants to secure sustainable livelihoods, effectively mitigating structural vulnerabilities such as unemployment, systemic poverty, and low income.

The transformative impact of migration on occupational structures and asset accumulation is vividly illustrated by qualitative narratives from the field. One participant highlighted this transition, noting:

"I arrived in Imphal with no capital and initially survived by renting a rickshaw. Today, I operate an autorickshaw that I purchased entirely with my own earnings."

Another migrant detailed a multi-decade trajectory of asset accumulation, tracing his evolution from a vulnerable tenant to a property owner in Mantripukhri:

"My wife and I left our village for Golapti in 1994, one year after our marriage, where we lived in a rented room while I worked as a rented-rickshaw puller. After accumulating some savings, I purchased two rickshaws to rent out to other drivers, which supplemented my daily income by 40 rupees. Within three to four years, my fleet expanded to 15 rickshaws. This allowed me to transition out of manual labor into full-time fleet management. I constructed a temporary rickshaw shed on a leased plot of land to manage operations. As our financial position improved, I was able to enroll my children in reputable private schools in Imphal. In 2010, I purchased our first residential property in Golapti for 10 lakh rupees. Around this period, the traditional rickshaw sector in Imphal rapidly declined due to the proliferation of motorized autorickshaw services. Adapting to this market shift, I liquidated my rickshaw fleet, purchased an autorickshaw,

and transitioned to driving. Concurrently, Mantripukhri emerged as a primary destination for rural-to-urban migration among the Pangal community. Recognizing the strategic long-term value and the relatively affordable land prices in Mantripukhri, I sold the Golapti property to purchase a larger plot in Mantripukhri, where I constructed our current home. We now reside there comfortably while generating a steady monthly rental income of 8,000 rupees from four tenant rooms."

The socio-economic trajectories of migrants in Imphal strongly align with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, the transition from manual, rented labor to asset ownership and self-employment directly advances SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 1 (No Poverty), notably through the mechanisms of asset accumulation and sustainable livelihood generation outlined in Target 1.4. Furthermore, the allocation of increased household income toward private schooling in Imphal underscores how safe migration pathways organically catalyze investments in SDG 4 (Quality Education), creating pathways for intergenerational mobility.

Gender-Responsive Migration and Female Empowerment (SDG 5)

Historically, the Pangal community – particularly in rural Manipur – has faced deep-seated educational marginalization, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of traditional patriarchal structures. Within these rural agrarian settings, girls were frequently viewed through a lens of economic liability, a perception reinforced by the systemic financial burden of marriage gifts (*awunpot*). Consequently, female education was deprioritized in favor of male siblings, often leading to early marriages immediately following puberty. However, contemporary migration to Imphal city has triggered a profound epistemological shift, wherein modern English-medium education is increasingly recognized as a vital mechanism for female empowerment. This aligns with Hugo's (2000) assertion that migration acts as a primary catalyst for women's empowerment by facilitating direct access to urban educational and employment avenues. Crucially, this study observes an increase in family migration explicitly motivated by the primary or secondary objective of securing quality education for daughters. Exposure to the liberal, egalitarian values of urban society has radically dismantled traditional biases, actively fostering gender parity in educational investment and directly advancing SDG 5 (Gender Equality). The expansion of female migration is further sustained by the emergence of localized, culturally secure urban infrastructure. Historically, the absence of competitive coaching centers within Pangal-concentrated urban clusters created a significant barrier; parents were highly reluctant to send their daughters to institutes located in ethnically distinct neighborhoods due to pervasive security concerns. Today, this institutional vacuum has been filled by the establishment of localized centers – such as the Joint Excellent Coaching Institute (JECI) and Concept Chemistry Classes ((C³) – within Pangal-dense neighborhoods. Combined with institutional housing like the minority girls' hostel in Hatta and thick kinship networks that provide localized guardianship, Imphal city now offers a safe, enabling environment for female students.

Upward Educational Mobility and Intergenerational Human Capital (SDG 4)

The spatial relocation of households to Imphal has generated transformative returns in human capital accumulation, directly operationalizing SDG 4 (Quality Education). Empirical data from this study (Table 5) reveals that an overwhelming 87.33 per cent of respondents experienced a substantial improvement in the educational status of themselves or their wards. Prior to migration, accessing high-tier educational infrastructure was structurally unfeasible due to geographic isolation. A touching case from the field involves a female Pangal student from a village located 65 kilometers away from greater Imphal; her relocation to the capital enabled her to secure the 4th rank in the 2023 High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) examination conducted by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM) – standing as the sole community member within the state's top ten positions. This is not an isolated achievement; female Pangal migrants have consistently secured positions within the top 20 list of state board exams and have repeatedly topped the highly competitive NEET-UG medical entrance examinations at the state level – outperforming their male counterparts. Furthermore, there is a burgeoning trend of female enrolment in postgraduate programs at apex state institutions, including Manipur University (Canchipur) and Dhanamanjuri University (Imphal). To secure these entries, parents exhibit an unprecedented level of commitment, proactively enrolling their daughters in specialized university entrance preparatory coaching. This wave of educational attainment has also successfully translated into formal employment, with several young Pangal women qualifying for civil and administrative posts via the Manipur Public Service Commission (MPSC).

Multidimensional Standards of Living and Healthcare Access (SDG 3 & SDG 6)

Beyond income and education, relocation to the urban core yields a structural leap in the physical quality of life, directly intersecting with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). The empirical findings presented in Table 6 show that 94.66 per cent of surveyed migrants experienced a marked improvement in their overall living conditions. In their rural villages of origin, a vast majority of these households suffered from structural deprivation, lacking basic utilities such as modern sanitation, indoor plumbing, clean running water, and reliable 24/7 electrical grids. Crucially, urban residency places these families within a highly accessible 2-to-3-kilometer radius of the state's premier medical infrastructures. This includes affordable, high-capacity public tertiary healthcare institutions like the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) and the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS), as well as advanced private diagnostic and clinical centers such as Raj Medicity, Advanced Hospital, and Babina Diagnostics. Proximity to these medical clusters significantly reduces health shocks, lowers maternal and infant vulnerability, and establishes a foundation of physical well-being that sustains the community's broader socio-economic advancement.

Conclusion

Sustainable development remains a critical imperative in the contemporary global landscape, particularly within emerging economies like India, where structural disparities, persistent poverty, and socio-economic vulnerabilities frequently destabilise regional peace

and prosperity. In response to these multidimensional challenges, the United Nations established the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal blueprint for equitable development. The empirical evidence and qualitative narratives examined in this study demonstrate that internal migration functions as a powerful, organic mechanism for accelerating and localising these global targets.

Specifically, migration facilitates an institutional shift in labour dynamics, enabling marginalized populations to transition from subsistence agriculture or precarious rural livelihoods into productive, self-sustaining employment within the urban informal sector. For the Pangal community, who are pushed by rural economic stagnation and a deficit of educational infrastructure, urban centres like Imphal act as vital economic and social pull factors. By embedding themselves within the city's informal economy, these migrants have achieved remarkable upward mobility. Despite entering the urban economic pyramid at its lowest tier – primarily as destitute tenants and manual rickshaw pullers – the majority have successfully accumulated assets, transitioned into micro-entrepreneurship, and achieved long-term financial security.

Beyond immediate income growth, relocation to the urban core offers migrants streamlined access to critical public goods and infrastructure. This includes advanced tertiary healthcare services, robust transportation networks, and modern utilities such as safe drinking water and sanitation – thereby structurally advancing SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). Simultaneously, these families contribute significantly to the host community's macroeconomic vitality, bridging critical urban labour deficits in infrastructure development and providing essential decentralized services to city residents.

Most paradoxically and profoundly, migration serves as an epistemological catalyst for gender transformation. The deep-seated patriarchal structures and educational biases prevalent in rural agrarian settings are actively dismantled through urban exposure. By participating in income-generating activities and achieving unprecedented milestones in high-tier competitive education, Pangal women have established socio-economic parity with their male counterparts. This shift directly advances SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), effectively positioning minority girls as agents of intergenerational change.

In conclusion, this study reframes the discourse on internal migration in Northeast India. Rather than viewing displacement or rural-to-urban shifts as a symptom of distress, migration must be recognized as a deliberate, highly effective strategy for structural empowerment. When supported by informal institutional networks and community resilience, mobility successfully translates individual aspirations into tangible, sustainable development outcomes, bridging the gap between localized realities and global policy ideals.

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Table No.1: Demographic profile of migrants

Sex			Age									
Total		P.C.	Under 25 years		25>35 years		35>50 years		50>60 years		Above 60 years	
			Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.
Male	134	89.33	13	9.70	40	29.85	56	41.79	20	14.92	5	3.73
Female	16	10.66	8	50	4	25	3	18.75	1	6.25	0	0
Total	150	100	21	14	44	29.33	59	39.33	21	14	5	3.33

Table No.2: Marital status of migrants

Sex	Single		Married		Divorced		Widowed		Total
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	
Male	18	13.43	115	85.82	1	0.74	0	0	134
Female	10	62.50	2	12.5	0	0	4	25	16
Total	28	18.66	117	78	1	0.66	4	2.66	150

Sex	To seek job		To gain Education and training		To open or extend Business		To seek modern urban facilities		Marital migration		Personal enmity in birth place		Job transfer		Others	
	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.	Total	P.C.
Male	63	47	30	22.3	17	12.6	4	2.9	0	0	0	0	2	1.64	18	13.4
Female	3	18.7	11	68.7	0	0	0	0	1	6.2	1	6.2	0	0	0	0
Total	66	46	41	27	17	11	4	2.6	1	0.6	1	0	2	1	18	12

I	9	33	33	6	3
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Table No.3: Primary factors of migration

Table No. 4: Occupational Status of Migrants

Sex	Govt. Employee	Private Employee	Self-employed	Daily Wager	Student	Unemployed	Total
	Total	percentage	Total	percentage	Total	percentage	Total
Male	24	17.91	17	12.68	62	46.26	134
Female	1	6.25	0	0	0	0	16
Total	25	16.66	17	11.33	62	41.33	150

Table No.5 : Change in the educational status of migrants

Sex	Improved		Worsened		Remained the same		Not applicable		Total
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total
Male	117	87.31	5	3.73	12	8.95	0	0	134
Female	14	87.50	0	0	2	12.50	0	0	16
Total	131	87.33	5	3.33	14	9.33	0	0	150

Table No. 6: Change in the living conditions of migrants

Sex	Improved		Worsened		Remained the same		Not applicable		Total
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total
Male	128	95.52	2	1.49	4	2.98	0	0	134

Femal e	14	87.50	0	0	2	12.50	0	0	16
Total	142	94.66	2	1.33	6	4	0	0	150
