

## Trafficking to Gulf Countries: The Lived Experiences of Indian Female Domestic Workers

H. Arokkiaraj\*

*Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, India*

S. Irudaya Rajan

*Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, India*

---

### Abstract

In this article, we look at the experiences of Indian female domestic workers (FDWs) trafficked to selected countries in the Gulf region. The exploratory research design was used to answer two research questions: 1) what are the migration routes facilitating human trafficking from India to the Gulf countries in relation to FDWs, and 2) what are the problems faced by FDWs at destination countries? We present results from in-depth interviews conducted among seven participants who agreed to share their experiences, along with data from other sources, including government agencies and personnel. The findings show that the trafficking happens by a process known as an “exiting visa” or “multiple visa system” in which respondents depart with two or more visas which include entry visas to the Gulf countries they intend to work in. Interestingly, the visa-provision systems in the selected Gulf countries, for example, Kuwait and UAE, have been misused by the human traffickers. The major airports at Sri Lanka, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai were used as transit points for trafficking the participating respondents. This process runs through a complex network of agents who transport the respondents from various locations within India until they arrive in the destination country. Upon arrival, it was found that due to their vulnerable position with respect to the agent and the employer, the respondents face harsh working and living conditions, with little to no help from the authorities.

---

### Key words

female, domestic workers, trafficking, India, Gulf countries

---

\* First author and corresponding author

## Introduction

Human trafficking is a mushrooming universal issue of exploiting human beings for sexual services, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation. It is more often recognized as a transnational crime across borders, but it also takes place within country borders. Since it is a clandestine criminal activity it is hard to measure (Cho, 2015). However, this practice continues today and has eroded the social fabric of many Third World and former Second World countries (Pourmokhtari, 2015). One of the negative fallouts of migration for survival is the increasing trend of instances of human trafficking (Das, 2016). Trafficked persons may be sold to other human traffickers for further movement (transportation); trafficked individuals may also be sold directly to the employers or supplied to a labor broker (Wheaton, Schauer, & Galli, 2010). Hence human trafficking is a transnational human rights problem that takes many forms (McCoy, 2019).

According to the Indian Ministry for Home Affairs (n.d.), in the past two decades the phenomenon of human trafficking has increased significantly at both global level and in countries in South Asia. Further, the report goes on to add that migration is an important phenomenon that influences and sustains trafficking by providing an easy supply of people. Understanding the relationship between migration and trafficking is crucial to help us understand the process of trafficking and in mapping the vulnerability of geographical areas. Further, Dixit (2017) also mentioned that India is not only an important source and destination country within South Asia, but also a transit location for human trafficking. While most human trafficking cases in the country are found to be intra-country, India is a main destination for individuals trafficked from Bangladesh and Nepal and also acts as a transit point for individuals trafficked further toward West Asia and other nations. Thus, essentially, India is a major origin country for persons trafficked to West Asia, North American countries, and to Europe.

As reported by the U.S. Department of State (2018) over the past five years, India is not only a source but also acts as destination and transit country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Kapur (2007) discussed how India, in the name of protecting women emigrants from cross-border trafficking, has imposed some restrictions on women emigrants working as unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. This served as a starting point to encourage these low-skilled emigrating women to do so using clandestine means. Kapur (2013) emphasized that both push and pull factors stimulate unsafe movement and the different sites into which human trafficking takes place, and the problems related

to migration remain largely unaddressed within the debates on human trafficking in India.

Specific regions in South India have strong transnational ties that condition the recruitment of domestic workers. Migrant families and kin clusters are key elements in this process, and migrants assiduously nurture transnational ties. This blends seamlessly with the activities of recruiters who are drawn from among migrants and operate on either side of borders (Kodoth, 2020). Table 1 indicates the emigration clearances granted to female domestic workers (FDWs) from India to work in Gulf countries. Since 2016, the number of FDWs moving to the Gulf countries has shown a declining trend. On the other hand, 3,628 complaints have been filed by female Indian workers at the Indian Embassy in Kuwait in the past four years (2015–2018).<sup>1</sup> This data on emigration clearance and complaints filed may be an indication of illegal or human trafficking in this migratory corridor. Under such circumstances, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) (2019) in a report mentioned that there are no statistics available to the Indian government on the number of Indian workers who migrate through unregistered recruitment agents for overseas employment and who generally travel from India on tourist/visit visas.

The job opportunities for FDWs are monopolized by unauthorized recruiting agents functioning in India and the *kafala* (migrant labor monitoring) system in the Gulf countries. Kodoth (2016) pointed out the dangerous disconnect between the perspectives of the Indian state and that of the emigrant domestic workers, which

**Table 1**  
*Number of Emigration Clearances Granted for FDWs*

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 (31.10.19)
Saudi Arabia	151	145	75	1	0
Oman	253	179	158	94	85
Kuwait	81	3	0	38	774
United Arab Emirates	664	644	529	310	178
Bahrain	58	59	51	38	30
Qatar	2	1	0	0	2

Source: MEA, 2019

<sup>1</sup> RTI reply dated 25/06/2019 from Embassy of India, Kuwait.

pushes women to depend on unscrupulous recruiters and heightens their vulnerability to abuse in the emigration process and in overseas employment (p. 103). Meanwhile, it is important to note that in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), two thirds of the victims are trafficked for forced labor (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018a).

Meanwhile, as the main system of labor migration management in the Gulf region, the *kafala* affects the lives of millions of migrants (Khan & Harroff-Tavel, 2011). This sponsorship system puts severe restrictions on labor mobility and has prevented the development of a local labor market. *Kafeels* (sponsors) may withhold workers' payments while demanding longer hours and preventing access to legal rights by confiscating of workers' passports, changing the terms of their contracts without consultation and the like (Jureidini & Hassan 2019, p. 96). In Gulf countries, visas for domestic workers are attached to the employer under the *kafala* system. Under this system, without the permission of their *kafeel*, the domestic workers cannot leave or get transferred. If they do so without the employer's consent, then they are termed as "absconding" detained, and face deportation (Begum, 2017). As Damir-Geilsdorfa and Pelican (2018) explained from their ethnographic study conducted among domestic workers in GCC countries, there is a realistic risk of apprehension and punishment when actors circumvent the *kafala* system or tamper with the labor law. Importantly, however, the risk is gradated, with labor migrants and domestic workers running a higher risk of being sanctioned than offending employers or sponsors. Further, Halabi (2008) mentions that domestic workers also fall prey to acts of violence ranging from instances of physical and sexual abuse, like getting slapped, beaten, or raped, to other forms of mental and verbal harassment and humiliation. This is in addition to terrible work conditions which include high workloads, being forced to work at multiple houses, denial of paid leave, and low salaries or non-payment of wages. Their accommodation is generally poor, with limited food and privacy.

As pointed out by Pattadath and Moors (2012) from their study among migrant domestic workers from Kerala in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), state actors misrecognize the problems these women are facing and by doing so further contribute to their precarious living conditions. The assumption that these women move from communities where they are "safe" to foreign lands where their lives are at risk stands in stark contrast to their everyday experience (p. 164). Further, a study conducted by Human Rights Watch and Varia (2008) among Asian female workers in Saudi Arabia revealed that the respondents were exposed to forced labor, trafficking, or slavery/slave-like situations. The results from the case studies

indicated how the respondents were subject to multiple abuses at the time of recruitment and up to their employment in Saudi Arabia which could be interlinked to gauge the exploitation and abuse that they experienced throughout the process. Hence, as highlighted by Jureidini (2010), one can identify the perpetrators of abuse and violence at various stages: for example, in transit by the middlemen and by employers in the workplace.

Pattadath (2020) argues that a host of actors are involved in a wide range of illegal activities to keep the system of informality active. For instance, there is a highly profitable system of visa trading where Emirati nationals act as “sponsors” (p. 98). On the other hand, Kanchana (2017) indicated that there are Indians who supply fake passports and other sets of documents, state officials who accept bribes, and employers who do not hesitate to employ women with an “illegal” status. Both the local nationals and the Indian nationals are therefore involved in the trafficking industry. The trafficking problem in the Gulf is primarily blamed on the unscrupulous recruitment agents but it often attests to the involvement of officials at several levels and also individuals with powerful influence and connections (p. 98).

### **Conceptualizing International Migration and the Human Trafficking Nexus**

The overlap between issues of migration, smuggling, trafficking, and slavery has created challenges for both academics and activists (Smith, 2011, p. 272). Until the early 1990s, trafficking was mainly viewed as a form of human smuggling and a type of illegal migration. Today, a more detailed, internationally agreed-upon definition of trafficking is available as a result of the signing in December 2000 of the United Nations (UN) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons.<sup>2</sup> Human trafficking is defined in the Trafficking Protocol as “The recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation” (Laczko & Gramegna, 2003, p. 180). Apart from including a general discussion of the problems of the legal definitions used to define human trafficking, it would be instructive to relate the UN definition in the Palermo Protocol to this study on human trafficking. Therefore, we have used the most widely accepted UN definition in the Palermo Protocol, especially in relation to women and children (UN, 2000). Based on this definition, it is evident that

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/protocoltraffickinginpersons.aspx>

trafficking in persons has three constituent elements: the act (what is done), the means (how it is done), and the purpose (why it is done) (UNODC, 2018b). Therefore, guided by these three elements, the next paragraph illustrate how human trafficking is contextualized in this study.

This paper takes the view that human trafficking is a process in which traffickers are involved in the “act” of recruiting FDWs (victims) and transporting them to the place where they will be exploited. The traffickers use different “means” which include threatening and forcing them to work in exploitative working conditions at the *kafeel*'s (sponsor's) house. The kafeel and the family use their power to abuse the women by giving low or no payment and forcing them to work for very long hours without proper food and breaks. Moreover, traffickers defraud female domestic workers for monetary gain and subject them to physical abuse. The main “purpose” of bringing these women across international borders is to traffic them for “exploitation”—involuntary servitude and slavery. The traffickers also exploit the victims as sources of forced labor. Women from different states of India are trafficked to selected Gulf countries to work as domestic workers for the kafeels.

### Methodology and Data Sources

This article is an attempt to answer two research questions in the context of international human trafficking from India: 1) what are the migration routes facilitating human trafficking from India to the Gulf countries in relation to FDWs, and 2) how in reality do traffickers bypass the rules regarding the movement of FDWs to the Gulf countries from India and what are the consequences subsequently faced by FDWs. This exploratory study relied on data gathered from the victims of human trafficking from India. In the absence of cross-border human trafficking data in India, the researchers largely depended on anecdotal information to locate the victims of human trafficking. Data collection for this research lasted for approximately two months. Initially, we communicated and interacted with Mr. Ramu and Mr. Nellai (names changed), both Indian nationals working as professional drivers in Gulf countries for the past fifteen years. They have been working on a voluntary basis with an Indian embassy in one of the Gulf countries in dealing with distressed Indian workers. After developing a rapport with them, we started collecting basic details about the trafficked FDWs. Through them, we contacted Mr. Kumar (name changed), another driver in Kuwait City who has been actively involved in helping distressed Indian workers

in Kuwait. Hence, Mr. Kumar is also one of the key persons who helped us to reach the victims of cross-border human trafficking.

To understand the official viewpoint regarding the human trafficking of FDWs from India to the Gulf countries, we conducted a formal interview with one of the key government officers from the Telangana Overseas Manpower Company Ltd. (TOMCOM), the official overseas labor recruiter for the state of Telangana.

We interviewed seven FDWs who were victims of labor trafficking to the Gulf countries from India. Although the paper is therefore based on a relatively small number of cases, it succeeds in identifying the major concerns related to the way domestic workers are victimized and criminalized during the process. The in-depth interviews were informal in nature. Among the interviewed respondents, other than two respondents who had returned from Saudi Arabia, all the other respondents were working in Kuwait and Oman. We used mobile devices (smartphones) to telephonically communicate with the respondents. Since respondents working in the Gulf countries had access to smartphones and thereby communication applications like WhatsApp and IMO, we were able to conduct informal interviews with the respondents through these platforms. Both internet availability and the respondents' availability determined the time and duration of the interviews. Therefore, during the process of data collection both the researchers and the respondents had access to the above-mentioned tools. One of the limitations of the research is that potential respondents were limited to individuals who had access to both smartphones and the internet.

Besides capturing the nature and extent of the exploitation faced by the respondents, this method of collecting data through informal interviews went a notch further and registered online grievances at the Indian embassies in Kuwait and Oman to rescue three of the respondents interviewed from their workplace. This intervention is elaborated as a separate section in order to discuss the response of the Indian embassies in Kuwait and Oman to the grievances raised. Given the depth of the data collected from the respondents and a key stakeholder, this qualitative empirical research relies extensively on the experiences (narratives) shared by the respondents. Also, the data collection strategy used to gather information from the respondents helped in recording real-time experiences.

Interviews from the seven respondents were conducted in Tamil and Hindi, and were translated and transcribed into English. The interview with the officer in TOMCOM was conducted in English. The process of collecting information from the respondents being kept captive by Indian agents in Kuwait and Oman was lengthy. Additional information was also gathered from the family members of

two respondents. To deal with the ethical issues involved in this research, the principle of “blanket anonymization” was adopted whereby the names and addresses of all respondents are kept anonymous (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015) and the respondents’ original names replaced by pseudonyms.

Importantly, this research does not claim to offer representative samples and generalizations; however, the findings are an attempt to illustrate the trafficking of FDWs in the India-Gulf corridor in its totality. We looked for common themes through reading the transcripts and drawing out themes that were brought up during the interviews. In the subsequent findings and discussion section, the themes that emerged from the interviews with the respondents are discussed. In the same section, the results are presented, and excerpts from the interviews are combined with explanations of the Indian Emigration Act and emigration operations. Therefore, interview-based findings are related to the practices of Indian emigration.

## Findings and Discussion

### Profile of the Respondents

The seven respondents who participated in this study were working in three countries, four in Kuwait, two in Saudi Arabia, and one in Oman. They hail from four different Indian states, four from Tamil Nadu and the remaining three from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Six of the seven were from rural areas; one respondent from Maharashtra hailed from an urban area. All were aged above 30 years. One respondent’s true age was 48, but with the help of local agents she was able to obtain a passport that gave her age as 36. In relation to this issue, it should be noted that in the employment contract forms prescribed by the Government of India to recruit domestic workers from India to Kuwait, the female domestic worker should not be more than 50 years of age on the date of application.<sup>3</sup> This could be a potential reason for the respondent having disguised her true age while obtaining the passport. A breakdown of the respondents’ educational background shows that three out of seven were illiterate while another three had attended school. One respondent posed an exception, as she had received a master’s degree but thereafter migrated to work as a domestic worker in Kuwait as all her previous attempts to find employment in Tamil Nadu were fruitless and her

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://indembkwt.gov.in/Pages/Visa\\_20\\_contract\\_domestic.pdf](http://indembkwt.gov.in/Pages/Visa_20_contract_domestic.pdf)



frustration eventually propelled her to emigrate.

Of the seven respondents, one was a divorcee, one was separated from her husband, and one was a widow. These three women had been living with their parents or with other family members. In the case of these three respondents, the complete absence of male members in their family forced them to migrate in order to meet the financial needs of the household. In other words, divorced, separated, and widowed respondents had to bear their family responsibilities and, in order to raise their children, they took up the role of sole breadwinner. The remaining four respondents had been living with their husbands. It was observed from these four respondents that their husbands' detrimental health patterns of alcohol abuse added to their family's financial burden. This forced them to migrate abroad to earn money to support their families and ensure a good future for their children. Therefore, lack of financial support from their husbands and their excessive dependence on alcohol were the major reasons for these respondents to migrate. None of the informants were engaged in any occupation before they migrated to one of the three countries in the Gulf region.

To sum up, family circumstances forced the respondents to make a choice and consider any one of the Gulf countries for work as a viable option to meet their familial financial needs, to overcome their difficult domestic situations, especially marital breakdowns, and to raise their children.

### Passport Categories in India and the Deceptions Faced by Respondents

India has a unique system of passport categorization. First is the Emigration Check Required (ECR) category, under which, according to the 1983 Emigration Act, "*Persons whose educational qualification is below matric (10th class)*" are categorized as ECR passport holders. Further, a holder of this passport category is required to obtain an "emigration clearance" from the relevant Protector of Emigrants (POE) office<sup>4</sup> before proceeding to any ECR countries for employment.<sup>5</sup> The second category is Emigration Check Not Required (ECNR):

---

<sup>4</sup> The Protectors of Emigrants are responsible for granting emigration clearance to the intending emigrants as per the procedure prescribed under the Emigration Act, 1983. The Protectors of Emigrants shall perform the functions assigned to them by this Act under the general superintendence and control of the Protector General of Emigrants. Further details available at <https://mea.gov.in/protector-general-emigrants.htm>

<sup>5</sup> United Arab Emirates (UAE), The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Malaysia, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria, Lebanon, and

*“Persons holding secondary school certificate (10th class pass), no specific mention of ECNR is made on the passports and the ones not endorsed as ECR, automatically belong to ECNR category.”* Thus, person holding ECNR passports travelling on any type of visa to any of the exempted countries are not required to obtain clearance from the POE offices. Further, according to the guidelines issued by India’s MEA (2019) *“Female workers cannot be recruited directly as maidservant/domestic worker, unless and until additional safety measures are followed viz. bank guarantee of 2500USD as security from foreign employer, visa attestation etc., by India Mission in 18 ECR countries.”*<sup>6</sup> Further in the same guidelines, the seven state-run agencies who are assigned to recruit domestic workers from the country have been exempted from the bank guarantee requirement since September 2017. These specifications apply to all Indian women above the age of 30 years with an ECR passport category and those going to any of the 18 ECR countries for taking up employment as maidservant/domestic worker, implying that they require emigration clearance. All six Gulf countries are listed as ECR countries.

In order to circumvent the guidelines as specified by MEA, traffickers operating in India and at destination countries choose alternate ways to employ Indian women as domestic workers in Gulf countries. In the case of ECNR passport holders, they do not need to get emigration clearance or fulfill other procedural formalities as laid down for ECR passport holders to work as domestic workers in any of the 18 ECR countries. Of the seven respondents interviewed, six hold an ECR passport, the seventh an ECNR passport. With the help of passport numbers obtained from the six ECR respondents, we checked whether they had obtained emigration clearance from the Government of India to work as domestic workers in the Gulf countries. This exercise was carried out with the consent of all six respondents (the emigration clearance status obtained by a female ECR passport holder going to any of the 18 ECR countries to work as a domestic worker can be checked on the eMigrate portal).<sup>7</sup> A check of the passport numbers revealed that none of the six respondents had obtained emigration clearance and that they were trafficked to Gulf countries to work as domestic workers (see the later explanation in the

---

Thailand. Emigration to Iraq is banned

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/32106/question\\_no1584\\_indian\\_domestic\\_helps\\_abroad](https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/32106/question_no1584_indian_domestic_helps_abroad)

<sup>7</sup> The eMigrate project is a transformational initiative of the Overseas Employment Division of MEA, Government of India, to automate the current emigration processes and eco-system. The ministry has undertaken this transformational e-governance program with a vision to transform emigration into a simple, transparent, orderly and humane process.

“exiting visa” section). Not surprisingly, these respondents, living in poverty and with limited literacy, had no knowledge about the prevailing systems in place for safe international migration. Hence, they were vulnerable to various forms of exploitation at the origin country, India, and at the destination countries—Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

For all seven respondents, their first points of contact in the entire migratory process are either the local agents or a neighbor known to the respondent directly or to any of her family members. Hence, the exploitation begins from known persons to unknown traffickers who operate this recruiting process. One respondent from Tamil Nadu said “My neighbor took money from me and introduced me to a woman agent in Trichy. They told me that I had to work for only eight hours... With these two women I reached Kuwait [...] But I faced heavy work pressure, and was tortured by the kafeel family.” The respondent from Karnataka shared that she was deceived by an agent in Tamil Nadu: “He (the agent) told me that in Kuwait I am going to work in a parlor. But after arriving there, the agent told me that as I don’t know Arabic, I would work as a housemaid.” Being deceived and the victim of labor trafficking, and with no other option, the respondent became a domestic worker in Kuwait.

The respondents who were working in Oman reported bad experiences similar to those of the other respondents who had returned to India from Saudi Arabia. One issue on which all respondents remarked was as follows:

During my stay in Oman, I was in so much pain and had so many problems. I did not even get my salary regularly. My health was also worsening as I worked without any rest and survived with only one meal a day.

In the kafeel house in Saudi, the salary used to go into the hand of my agent, then after taking his share he gave the rest to me. Because of this, I did not get my salary for many months. At last my health deteriorated after working day and night. My diabetes level also increased.

Respondents’ efforts to achieve their economic aspirations by working in Gulf countries shattered not only their dreams but their personal lives as well. All the respondents opined that the experience profited them very little and that only minimal economic benefits could be achieved after facing all the hardships and tribulations of working as domestic help in the Gulf countries.

## “Exiting Visa”: The Process of International Migration and Trafficking of FDWs

This section deals with the trafficking process; specifically, with the phenomenon of the “exiting visa.” The data obtained from the Government of India, as indicated in Table 2, clearly shows that the number of documented ECR-category female domestic workers migrating overseas, including the Gulf countries, is on the decline. While inquiring into the reasons behind this decline, a senior official from TOMCOM stated that “From Telangana, not many female workers are migrating (2016–106; 2017–71) as per the information provided by the POE office in Hyderabad. This figure shows that most of them have been going without obtaining emigration clearance or have managed to travel on visit visas and thereafter worked illegally in the destination countries.” This indicates that cross-border human trafficking in India takes place by means of what is known among the recruiting agents as an “exiting visa.”

The Standing Commission on Labour’s report (2017–18, p.42) to the MEA pointed that the “flouting of norms by unscrupulous agents who in order to make a quick buck are circumventing the rules governing the employment of housemaids in the 18 ECR countries.” The Commission’s report states that these agents have been able to get tacit support from the consular sections of these 18 ECR countries, providing them with “dual visas.” On departure, they get tourist visas stamped by the emigration officials and on arrival at their destination, get employment visas stamped for employment. While this lesser-known phenomenon has been in place for a little while now, it has only recently been revealed in a government document of this kind.

**Table 2**  
*Data on Indian Female Domestic Worker Emigration by State*

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Andhra Pradesh	965	112	51	41	27	85
Karnataka	43	66	68	44	28	20
Kerala	470	597	497	388	238	149
Tamil Nadu	60	95	86	69	52	27
Telangana	38	36	29	16	8	6

*Note.* Data sourced through the Right to Information Act in 2019

The phenomenon of the “exiting visa” can be traced in number of ways, but some corridors through which the practice is carried out can be seen below. First, we charted the specific routes through which the respondents were transported:

Chennai (Tamil Nadu) to Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) to Dubai (UAE)  
to Kuwait  
Tamil Nadu to Colombo (Sri Lanka) to Saudi Arabia  
Maharashtra to Hyderabad to Saudi Arabia to Kuwait  
Karnataka to Hyderabad to Abu Dhabi (UAE) to Oman  
Tamil Nadu to Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) to Kuwait

From the respondents, we understood the people involved and arrangements made by the unscrupulous agents in the process of trafficking them. One respondent travelled through Chennai, Hyderabad, then to Sri Lanka by on-arrival tourist visa, waited there for some days, and then used an entry visa to enter Saudi Arabia. Similarly, from Mumbai or Hyderabad they arrived at Dubai, Abu Dhabi on a tourist visa, and then the agents’ network facilitated their entry into Kuwait and Oman. In a very peculiar case, from a village in Thirunelveli (Tamil Nadu) a respondent travelled to Chennai by bus, flew to Andaman, and then arrived in Kuwait. As mentioned before, the trafficking process is run and bolstered through a network of agents operating in the origin and the destination countries.

From the above description, it is evident that unscrupulous agents have migratory routes which are quite frequently used. As per the data, we found that Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sri Lanka are used as places of transit. As ECR passport holders do not require any Indian Government clearance to visit the UAE and Sri Lanka on a tourist visa, the passport holders of this category can easily leave India. Therefore, they avoid having to obtain emigration clearance from a POE to leave India for employment purposes and use these countries as transit points to enter and work as domestic workers in Gulf countries. For example, in Kuwait an “entry visa” is issued in the form of a paper visa. This “entry visa” allows a 90-day stay in the country and serves the purpose of granting these workers entry to Kuwait. This “entry visa” is used upon transit from Sri Lanka or the UAE, even from Saudi Arabia, and acts as their entry document into Kuwait. As one respondent from Tamil Nadu, who went to Kuwait as part of this process, mentioned:

The agent gave us strict instructions on what to do when we reach the airport. We have two tickets, the first one for Sri Lanka in our hand and

the paper visa which they issued for Kuwait safely put away in our handbags. The agent instructed us very emphatically not to reveal the Kuwait visa under any circumstances. We cleared immigration in India and made our way to Sri Lanka. There we stayed for a few hours and then showed our Kuwait visa to the immigration over there; then we got entry into Kuwait.

This case also brings to the forefront and exposes the “dual visa” system, in which women depart with tourist visas to Sri Lanka (the transit country) but also have entry visas to other Gulf countries. Another respondent explained how the trafficker trained and instructed them to reply if they were asked about their tourist visit to the UAE:

At the immigration counter in India, the officer asked me why I was going to Dubai. I replied that I had relatives in Dubai, so I was going to meet them. But I do not have anyone in Dubai. The agent trained me and other women to answer similarly if we were asked any questions at the immigration counter in India.

Yet another respondent mentioned another route through which agents trafficked domestic workers to Saudi Arabia. She mentioned:

Initially the agent told me that I had a direct flight to Saudi Arabia. However, after reaching Chennai, I found out that I had to first go to Sri Lanka. Along with me there were three more women from other parts of India—one woman from Telangana and two from Maharashtra. We all landed at Sri Lanka where we spent three days. The agent then gave us the visa and ticket for Saudi. So, we all reached Saudi from the Sri Lanka airport.

Meanwhile from the respondents, we also came to know that selected immigration officers in Hyderabad and Mumbai airports were in touch with the agents and would know when the agents’ clients would be arriving for clearance. One of the respondents shared her experience at the immigration counter in Hyderabad Airport:

At the airport, an officer (immigration) stopped me and asked me to show

the second ticket (which was for Kuwait) and also threatened me at first, but I insisted that I was going to meet my brother in Dubai on a tourist visa. After some time, another officer came (immigration) and permitted me to go further. The agent never sent all the women together. He always sent groups of four or five women so that we never aroused any suspicion.

After landing at the destination, the agents arrange for a medical test, which is necessary for stamping the work permit visa, which then gives them access to work. Thus, it is clear that these agents have a vast network for trafficking FDWs from India to the countries in which the respondents worked. It is an intricate network that includes a whole host of players in the origin, transit, and destination countries and which enables such instances of labor trafficking, involving large sums of money. This has consequences, mostly negative ones, for the workers who go through this process, wherein they are entirely dependent on the unscrupulous agent and their network to survive in the destination countries.

Upon enquiring about this trend of trafficking FDWs to Gulf countries, a senior officer from TOMCOM replied that:

Regarding women workers going to the Gulf via Hyderabad, to the best of my knowledge they must be travelling on a visitor's visa and once they enter the foreign country they work as domestic housemaids with no rights or protection. As Indians we can travel from any airport from our country, I have also heard that Hyderabad women workers travel to the Gulf via Mumbai Airport, even though we have all international flight connections from Hyderabad.

Overall findings indicate the active involvement of unscrupulous agents who send women on visiting visas, and then later make them work as housemaids without any legal basis. A similar configuration of the human-trafficking chain was pointed out by MEA (2019a), that in some cases female workers are taken by unauthorized Indian recruiting agents on a tourist visa to a third country and are then sent to Gulf countries on an employment visa to bypass government safeguards which are put in place for the protection of female workers.

Upon arrival at the destination country, the respondents were completely dependent on their agents' network for employment. The agents deceived the respondents and kept them unaware of the situation in order to keep them under their control. A respondent revealed her uncertainty until she arrived in Kuwait:

Around 10.30 am we all reached Abu Dhabi airport and the next flight was in the evening at 6 pm. During the time all the women got to know about each other and developed friendly ties. The entire day we were sitting there without food or water as we did not have local currency to buy anything. Around 11 pm we all reached Kuwait and there people already knew about our status as kadama (maids). From there we went to the Sheikh's house with the agent's driver.

The following narrative exposes the plight of a respondent who struggled at the hands of the agent and in the houses where she worked:

While working in Oman I called the agent to send me back to India as I was not getting my salary or any peace there. My health was also deteriorating with the passage of time. He convinced me to stay in Oman and said he would find a better house and owner for me. He took me from the first house and kept me in Maktab for two days. Then again, he sent me to another house to work as maid, but that people of that house were also not nice. I complained to him about them and said I wanted to go back home. But he refused and asked for 2.5 lakh rupees if I wished to go home. Whenever I said to my owner that I wanted to go home she replied, "give me 2.5 lakh rupees first, then go."

The above narrative shows how these women are commodified and exposed to an extremely exploitative work environment. Their high dependence on the agents and the *kafuels* who sponsor them makes them vulnerable to the most extreme physical and mental exploitation. Trafficking will always be there as long as there are human traffickers willing to engage in it. If the borders in India are properly protected and the relevant internal regulations implemented, trafficking will be limited.

Finally, to understand how the network of agents works in Kuwait, one key respondent, who has been working in Kuwait as a professional driver for the past fifteen years, mentioned that:

His (friend's) office acts as the front office for the process in Kuwait. The Kuwaitis would come to the office in order to get a maid and select from the women that were brought from India. The person (Kuwaiti) would then pick one among the women based on their physical attributes, and



they would send the women with the person and instruct her that she has to work in the house of that person. Depending on the age and physical attributes, the price for the women ranges from 800 Kuwaiti Dinar (KWD) to 1500 KWD. The woman would then go to work at the Kuwaiti citizen's house where she would work for a month, whereupon the person who pays for her would decide whether he was happy with the services the woman provided. If not, then the woman would be moved back from his home to the office. My friend's office would then look to provide another woman as a replacement.

To register a business in Kuwait, the help of a Kuwaiti citizen is required, who then acts as the vanguard for the entire operation. The business involves the setting up of an office and its associated branches at other places in Kuwait, which is known as a *Maktab* in local parlance. This acts as the hub for receiving women from India and other countries to work as domestic workers in Kuwait. Here it should be mentioned that Kuwait has been actively engaged in combating the trafficking of temporary contract workers through a variety of laws and regulations, such as the Trafficking Law 91/2013, which aims to eradicate trafficking in Kuwait, and the Domestic Workers (DW) Law 68/2015 (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018). However, a study has pointed out that the majority of domestic workers are not aware of the DW law (Arab Times, 2018). Likewise, from the narratives, interviewed domestic workers appeared unaware of the existing legal framework for their protection in Kuwait.

### Intervention

As our analysis clearly indicates, FDWs who are being trafficked to the Gulf region are among the vulnerable section of emigrants from India. Both state and non-state actors, including bureaucrats, unscrupulous agents, and others are responsible for the existing conditions of FDW trafficking. As mentioned earlier, we raised the grievances at various government offices in India and the Indian embassies in Kuwait and Oman. However, this proved ineffective. Often, the embassy's response further complicates matters while the women continue to endure extremely exploitative conditions, as is shown in a case detailed below:

We have raised my sister's issue with the Tamil Nadu Government and Indian Embassy in Oman (MADAD). Despite continuous appeals to the

government institutions, so far, no action has been taken by either the government institution in India or the Indian Embassy in Oman to rescue my sister. We are worried about her. There has been no communication with her family for the last month. We are very scared, and do not know what has happened to her. The agent is blackmailing us to pay Rs 100,000 if my sister has to come home.

The Government of India has specific grievance redressal mechanisms for Indians who encounter problems abroad. Migrant Resource Centers (MRCs) have been established by the MEA in different Indian cities and act as a single point window source for registering grievances. Distressed migrants can also register their complaints through the MEA online grievance redressal portal, MADAD.<sup>8</sup> Complaints can be registered either by the distressed migrants themselves or by someone else and they can thereafter keep track of the proceedings. However, when the FDWs migrated to the Gulf countries through irregular channels, such as unauthorized agents, as reported by the respondents, they found difficulties in registering and availing of the services. Even registering a complaint on MADAD can be an arduous task, as explained by the husband of one respondent in an official complaint letter lodged by him on her behalf:

My wife is suffering from harassment at the hands of her agent. We contacted the MRC in Chennai a few weeks ago, but the MRC has yet to feed our complaint into the MADAD portal, which is now turning out to be a matter of great concern. We cannot follow up our complaint with the embassy as a result.

The lax services in each case cost the respondents valuable time, which made their already vulnerable conditions even worse. The respondents were at the mercy of the sponsors and agents when it came to suffering from physical and mental abuse, poor working and living conditions, and the extortion faced by their family members in order to secure their freedom. In cases like these, a timely response is of the utmost importance and can make a lot of difference.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Government of India has recently launched a new online portal: MADAD ('MEA' in Aid of Diaspora in Distress), a Consular Services Management System. Consular grievances regarding compensation, court cases, domestic help, imprisonment abroad, transportation of mortal remains, repatriation, salary dues, and tracing whereabouts can be lodged under this scheme.

At the destination, where they faced issues such as lack of communication, it was even more difficult for the respondents to access consular services. Moreover, a respondent was asked to take extraordinary risks in order to access the India Embassy services in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, as she explained:

My sponsor used to lock me in the house when he would be away from home. The lock could only be opened using a key-card. When I approached the embassy in Riyadh to help me from there, they told me that they could not help me in any way unless I got myself to the nearest shelter home. This left me in an even more helpless situation as they didn't even suggest an alternative although knowing exactly the difficulty of my situation and the massive risk I would be taking by trying to escape on my own.

In the case of another respondent, she was forced to jump out of a third-floor apartment in order to escape the torture she faced at the hands of her sponsor, which ended up with her being hospitalized. The lack of any medical support for the respondent and the blackmail faced by the respondent's mother at the hands of the agent is reflected in the grievance letter as stated below:

We raised this issue with the Indian Embassy in Kuwait through the Thiruvapur Collector's office, and three weeks later an embassy officer met her in Jabariya Hospital, Kuwait. However, apart from that, the Embassy has not been proactive in mitigating this issue after we raised the complaint on 10-06-2019. It is sad that the Embassy took such a long time to intervene in this case. During this time, I was tortured and blackmailed by the agent to pay Rs 150,000 for my medical treatment. Further, my mother has filed complaints against these agents at Trichy Superintendent of Police (SP) office and Tirunelveli SP office. So far, we do not know of any action taken by the police officials on this matter.

The responses, therefore, also show a noticeable lack of communication between the Ministry officials and the local police in the case of monitoring and apprehending the unscrupulous agents and brokers operating domestically and at the destination. Despite the existence of MADAD and its grievance redressal tracking facilities, there was still a lack of transparency, at least in the cases analyzed here. Respondents' family members mentioned the lack of assistance at each level which

becomes an additional obstacle for the entire family to endure.

### Conclusion

Women take the difficult road of international migration for economic reasons despite the associated risk of trafficking and other eventualities. The information on the socio-economic background of the respondents involved provides important insights and demonstrates their vulnerability, both in India and in the Gulf region. These findings indicate options for public policy e.g., literacy training, public awareness campaigns in the country of origin. The study examines labor trafficking across the Indian border. Respondents explained clearly the trafficking routes and problems prevailing in the system which subsequently leads to “exiting visas.” As the Indian government attempts to regulate the migration of FDWs from India to the Gulf countries by imposing age and other restrictions, this may lead to an increase in unregularized migratory processes, which in turn leads to trafficking. The evidence presented showed major concerns relating to how FDWs were victimized throughout the process. Overall, this paper vividly exposes the modus operandi behind the trafficking of women from India to Gulf countries. It also explains the causes and consequences of such trafficking and elaborates the lethargic approach of officials in tackling the issue. Finally, although this study does not claim that its findings can be generalized, they can still act as helpful indicators for future studies focused on the issues raised.

## References

- Begum, R. (2017, June 16). Gulf States' slow march toward domestic workers' rights. *Human Rights Watch News*, Retrieved from [hrw.org/news/2017/06/16/gulf-states-slow-march-toward-domestic-workers-rights](http://hrw.org/news/2017/06/16/gulf-states-slow-march-toward-domestic-workers-rights)
- Cho, S. Y. (2015). Evaluating policies against human trafficking worldwide: An overview and review of the 3P index. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 86–99. doi:10.1080/23322705.2015.1014660
- Damir-Geilsdorf, S., & Pelican, M. (2018). Between regular and irregular employment: Subverting the *kafala* system in the GCC countries. *Migration and Development*, 8(2), 155–175. doi:10.1080/21632324.2018.1479215
- Das, P. (2016). *Illegal migration from Bangladesh. Deportation, border fences and work permit*. IDSA Monograph Series. No 56, December 2016. New Delhi, India: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved from [https://idsa.in/monograph/illegal-migration-from-bangladesh\\_pdas](https://idsa.in/monograph/illegal-migration-from-bangladesh_pdas)
- Dixit, M. (2017). Cross-border trafficking of Bangladeshi girls. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 52(51), 27.
- Halabi, R. (2008). Contract enslavement of female migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. *Human Rights and Human Welfare*, 2, 43–58.
- Human Rights Watch (Organization), & Varia, N. (2008). *“As If I Am Not Human”: Abuses against Asian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch.
- International Organization for Migration. (2018). *Migration governance overview: The State of Kuwait*. Retrieved from <https://migrationdataportal.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/MGI%20Kuwait%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>
- Jureidini, R. (2010). Trafficking and contract migrant workers in the Middle East. *International Migration*, 48(4), 142–163. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00614.x
- Jureidini, R., & Hassan, S. (2019). The Islamic principle of Kafala as applied to migrant workers: Traditional continuity and reform. In R. Jureidini & S. Hassan (Eds.), *Migration and Islamic Ethics* (pp. 92–109). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi:10.1163/9789004417342\_007
- Kanchana, R. (2017). Are India's policies increasing the vulnerability of its female migrants in the Arab Gulf Countries? In S. Rajan (Ed.), *India Migration Report 2016: Gulf Migration*. 90. doi:10.4324/9781315443409
- Kapur, R. (2007). India: Country report. In M. Dottridge (Ed.), *Collateral damage: The impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights around the world*. Bangkok, Thailand: Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. Retrieved from <http://www.gaatw.org/>

Collateral%20Damage\_Final/singlefile\_CollateralDamagefinal.pdf

- Kapur, R. (2013), Gender, sovereignty and the rise of a sexual security regime in international law and postcolonial India. *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, 14(2), 317–345.
- Khan, A., & Harroff-Tavel, H. (2011). Reforming the Kafala: Challenges and opportunities in moving forward. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 20(3–4), 293–313. doi:10.1177/011719681102000303
- Kodoth, P. (2016). Structural violence against emigrant domestic workers and survival in the Middle East: The effects of Indian emigration policy. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 28(1), 83–106. doi:10.1177/0260107915609824
- Kodoth, P. (2020). Unauthorized recruitment of migrant domestic workers from India to the Middle East: Interest conflicts, patriarchal nationalism and state policy. In M. Baas (Ed.), *The migration industry in Asia* (pp. 77–107). Singapore, Singapore: Palgrave Pivot. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9694-6\_5
- Laczko, F., & Gramegna, M. A. (2003). Developing better indicators of human trafficking. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 10(1), 179–194.
- McCoy, M. (2019). Measurements of vulnerability to domestic minor sex trafficking: A systematic review. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 5(1), 1–12. doi:10.1080/23322705.2017.1385334
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (n.d.). *Human trafficking: A vision document*. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2019). *Indian domestic helps abroad*. New Delhi, India. Government of India. Retrieved from [https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/32106/question\\_no1584\\_indian\\_domestic\\_helps\\_abroad](https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/32106/question_no1584_indian_domestic_helps_abroad)
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2019a). *Issues relating to migrant workers including appropriate legislative framework and skill development initiatives for prospective emigrants*. New Delhi, India: Government of India. Retrieved from [http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/External%20Affairs/16\\_External\\_Affairs\\_23.pdf](http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/External%20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_23.pdf)
- Pattadath, B., & Moors, A. (2012). Moving between Kerala and Dubai: Women domestic workers, state actors and the misrecognition of problems. In B. Kalir, M. Sur, & W. Schendel (Eds.), *Mobile practices and regimes of permissiveness* (pp. 151–168). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: University of Amsterdam Press.
- Pattadath, B. (2020). The blurred boundaries of migration: Transnational flows of women domestic workers from Kerala to UAE. *Social Change*, 50(1), 95–108. doi:10.1177/0049085719901076
- Pourmokhtari, N. (2015). Global human trafficking unmasked: A feminist rights-based approach. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(2), 156–166. doi:10.1080/23322705.2014.1000078

- Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J., & Kitzinger, C. (2015). Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice. *Qualitative Research*, 15(5), 616–632. doi:10.1177/1468794114550439
- Smith, H. M. (2011). Sex trafficking: Trends, challenges, and the limitations of international law. *Human Rights Review*, 12(3), 271–286. doi:10.1007/s12142-010-0185-4
- Standing Committee on Labour. (2017-18). *Overseas employment of women workers including nurses and maids, issues and regulatory framework*. Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Labour & Employment. Retrieved from [http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/Labour/16\\_Labour\\_40.pdf](http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/Labour/16_Labour_40.pdf)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018a). *Global report on trafficking in persons*. Retrieved from [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP\\_2018\\_BOOK\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018b). *The international legal definition of trafficking in persons: Consolidation of research findings and reflection on issues raised*. Retrieved from [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2018/Issue\\_Paper\\_International\\_Definition\\_TIP.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2018/Issue_Paper_International_Definition_TIP.pdf)
- United Nations. (2000). *Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children*. G.A. Res. 55/25, annex II, U.N. Doc. A/RES/55/25. Palermo, Italy: United Nations General Assembly.
- U.S. Department of State. (2018). *Trafficking in persons report*. Washington, DC: Department of State. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/282798.pdf>
- Wheaton, E. M., Schauer, E. J., & Galli, T. V. (2010). Economics of human trafficking. *International Migration*, 48(4), 114–141. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00592.x
- 71.59% of domestic workers are not aware of law 68/2015. (2018, December 12). *Arab Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/71-59-of-domestic-workers-are-not-aware-of-law-68-2015/>

*Biographical Note:* Dr. **H. Arokkiaraj**, received his Ph.D. (Social Work) from the University of Delhi, India. His interest is in migration and mobility. Email: [arokkiaraj2006@gmail.com](mailto:arokkiaraj2006@gmail.com)

*Biographical Note:* **S. Irudaya Rajan** is Professor at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Kerala, India and he is the chairman of IIMAD, India. He is the editor of the series, India Migration Report (Routledge) since 2010 and Founder Editor-in-Chief of Migration and Development. He is Chair of the KNOMAD thematic working group on internal migration and urbanization managed by the World Bank. Email: [rajan@iimad.org](mailto:rajan@iimad.org)