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In the Shadow of the State: Recruitment and Migration of South Indian Women as Domestic Workers to the Middle East

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Abbreviations

AED: UAE Dirhams
ANM: Auxiliary Nursing and Midwifery
AP: Andhra Pradesh
BD: Bahraini Dinar
D and C: Dilation and Curettage procedure
ECR: Emigration Check Required
ECNR: Emigration Check Not Required
GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council
GOI: Government of India
IHRC: International Human Rights Clinic
ILO: International Labour Organization
INR: Indian Rupee
IT: Information Technology
KD: Kuwaiti Dinar
MWDW: Migrant women domestic workers
MEA: Ministry of External Affairs
MOIA: Ministry of Overseas Indian affairs
MOU: Memorandum of Understanding
NDWF: National Domestic Workers Federation
NORKA: Non Resident Keralites Association
NRI: Non Resident Indian
OBC: Other Backward Classes
OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMCAP: Overseas Manpower Corporation of Andhra Pradesh
OMR: Omani Riyal
PGE: Protector General of Emigrants
POE: Protector of Emigrants
SAR: Saudi Arabian Riyal
SC: Scheduled Castes
SEWA: Self Employed Women's Association
ST: Scheduled Tribes
TOMCOM: Telangana Overseas Manpower Corporation
UAE: United Arab Emirates
US: United States of America

Executive Summary

The Middle East has been the site of some of the worst human and labour rights violations against migrant domestic workers. India is one of the major origin countries of migrant women domestic workers (MWDWs) to the Middle East but there is little research on this theme, especially with a focus on the source contexts in the country. This paper provides an analytical description of recruitment and migration of women as domestic workers from some of the key sending regions in Andhra Pradesh (henceforth AP) and Kerala, south Indian states with a history of women's migration to the Middle East going back to the mid-twentieth century. A prominent feature of migration of women domestic workers from India is its spatial clustering even within South India to specific regions that have long-standing and rich connections with the Middle East.

The major part of the research for this paper was conducted through fieldwork in the districts of East Godavari and YSR Kadapa (henceforth Kadapa) in AP and Thiruvananthapuram (henceforth Trivandrum) and Malappuram in Kerala, known to have spatial concentrations of women migrants. The paper draws on a sample survey of migrant domestic workers conducted in these districts in 2013 comprising workers who had returned in 2008 or later, irrespective of when they had migrated. The survey covered a wide spectrum of workers in terms of the temporal depth of migration. In 2013–14, interviews were conducted with migrant domestic workers and other stakeholders including family members of migrant workers, migration intermediaries (interchangeably referred to as brokers or agents), government officials concerned with international migration, as well as migrant rights activists and representatives of organizations that organize domestic workers.

Successive changes in emigration rules since 2014 have led to an unprecedented fall in the regular migration of women domestic workers. To understand the implications of these regulatory changes, a few migrant women who had returned from employment due to abuse and officials from public sector recruitment agencies were interviewed between 2015 and 2018. Subsequently, more structured fieldwork was conducted in East Godavari and three districts of Kerala between May and June 2019 to understand how women and other stakeholders were responding to a ban imposed on private recruitment of migrant women domestic workers in August 2016.

The paper brings together analyses of quantitative data and narratives of women migrants with interviews of migration intermediaries and government officials to show that India's emigration policy is driven by stereotypes of migrant women and private intermediaries, but that migrant women's experiences of recruitment and overseas employment are diverse, layered and nuanced. A restrictive emigration policy has reduced the potential benefits of overseas employment. Prompted by the desire to improve their lives, migrant women have drawn on their own individual grit and resourcefulness and the support of their networks at home and in the destination countries to confront difficulties in their migration trajectories and turn overseas employment into an opportunity.

The paper is organized around three broad questions. The first question asks – *who* migrates or, in other words, who are the women who take up employment as domestic workers in the Middle East? In exploring this question, the connections between the source regions and destination countries have been highlighted to historicize migration. Following this, the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of women migrants have been examined along with the migration trajectories of women to arrive at a better understanding of the conditions and circumstances in which specific categories of women migrate from the source regions.

Analysis of survey data and the qualitative material showed that there are important distinctions in the nature of decision-making in migrant families in AP and Kerala and in the socio-economic and demographic characters of women's migration from these states. It was striking that there was large-scale participation of scheduled caste (SC) women from AP in this

migration but not from Kerala, where migration was dominated by women from the other backward classes (OBC). The SCs in East Godavari achieved a migratory sensibility through their participation in pre-independence migration to Burma, and their migration was assisted by the connections they had acquired in Bombay (now Mumbai) again through migration since the pre-independence period.

Migrants from AP were younger and had started migrating more recently compared to migrants from Kerala. Migrant women from Kerala were better off in terms of developmental characteristics, i.e., literacy and age at marriage than migrant women from AP but the gap between women migrants and the average woman in AP was much smaller than in Kerala. It may be possible to infer that women's migration from AP is more mainstream and buoyant, whereas women migrants from Kerala are more marginal. Along with the findings from the analysis of the cost and financing of migration, it was evident that women migrants from AP started from a position of greater vulnerability but had higher marginal gains from migration than women from Kerala.

Overseas migration from India as well as from Kerala and AP has been male dominated. This called for a probing of the nature of decision-making within families of women migrants to understand whether there was mutual agreement between spouses about women's migration (and support from other family members) or whether women migrate against the tide of social approval. There were striking differences between migrant women from Kerala and AP as, more often than not, the decision about women's migration was taken jointly by spouses among married couples in AP, but in Kerala it was taken by the woman alone. It was also more difficult for women in Kerala to garner legitimacy for migration within their own communities than it was for women in AP.

The second question was concerned with *how* women migrate. The discussion foregrounded the migration governance systems at the source and destinations as well as the networks and connections that bound aspiring migrants, migration intermediaries and sponsors. In explaining egregious violations of labour rights in the Middle East, scholars have underlined structural factors and the limits of the origin country's policies in protecting migrant workers in the destination. In particular, they have underlined the effects of the Kafala system of sponsorship and recruitment in the Middle East. There has been scarcely any analysis of the impact of the governance framework for recruitment in India on the extent and nature of migration of "low-skilled" women from the country. Migration in this stream has been shaped importantly by two factors: one, long-term state protectionism, which generated disincentives and spawned irregular practices; and two, the varied social networks and the rich connections between people in the source regions and the destination countries, which have fostered migration.

India's protectionist policy framework was strengthened in 2011 with the enforcement of the condition that sponsors of Indian women domestic workers must pay a refundable security deposit of US$ 2,500 to be used if the worker needed to be repatriated. Kuwait, which has the largest share of Indian women migrant domestic workers, refused to accept this condition, and India was able to enforce it fully in the ECR countries only in 2014. In 2016, the Indian government banned recruitment through private recruitment agencies, making it mandatory that women domestic workers from the country be recruited only through six stipulated public sector agencies or directly by an overseas employer by placing a request through the eMigrate system.

In probing the second question, the focus is on how, in the absence of legitimate space for exercising the right to mobility and overseas employment, aspiring women and their families have leveraged social networks and personal connections and tied up with private intermediaries to obtain overseas employment and travel to the destination countries.

India's policy framework pushed private intermediation into a twilight zone characterized by irregularities, and complex manipulations by unauthorized agents in association with rent-seeking government officials. Irregular practices have facilitated overseas journeys when women did not qualify for emigration clearance. However, these practices may have gained wide usage also because they appear to be simpler than the Indian government's regular procedures.

Migration intermediaries are believed to be the principal agents of the exploitation of

women migrants. While this perception has influenced policymaking, it is heightened by a failure to recognize the diversity and range of migration intermediaries. The analysis in this paper suggests that this recognition may be key to understanding women's continued resorting to private recruiters. Women aspirants and migration intermediaries are bound by shared interests which have generated scope for negotiation on both sides. But where migrant women are excessively dependent on intermediaries, it has exacerbated their vulnerability and strengthened the possibility of severe exploitation. The analysis of the costs and financing of migration showed that women migrants were able to reduce their dependence on migration intermediaries in subsequent journeys and that this was more pronounced for women from AP than for women from Kerala.

The third question asks where women domestic workers migrate to and highlights the patterns of migration between source regions and destination countries. Indian women domestic workers have worked in most Middle Eastern countries, with Kuwait being the most prominent. At present, Indian women are second only to Filipina women in terms of their numerical presence in Kuwait. This is despite the fact that the Philippines has pursued a promotional migration policy, while the Indian state has sought actively to discourage women's migration. The level of flows of Indian domestic workers to Kuwait underscores the strength of informal ties nurtured by migrant workers and migration intermediaries in the source areas and with sponsors and recruitment agencies in Kuwait.

Indian women also have a visible presence in the UAE and Oman. The sample survey reflected these trends but also allowed us to examine patterns of flows over the decades. Saudi Arabia was not a big destination for Indian women overall but had a particular salience in two of the sending regions, Malappuram and Kadapa, which were also regions with a relatively larger Muslim population. However, this was prior to India signing a mobility agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2014. There have been reports of considerable irregular mobility to Saudi Arabia in recent years and claims from destination sources of a huge increase in the presence of Indian women domestic workers.

Under the present regime, which is marked by a total ban on private intermediation, there are distinct changes in the methods of informal intermediation of women's migration. Interviews with women who had migrated in recent years showed that new practices were being used to circumvent regulations, even as older irregular practices had gained new dimensions. A noticeable practice is the manipulation of visas and visa categories. Visit visas, which were used even earlier to travel for work and to circumvent the lack of documents necessary for emigration clearance, are being used much more frequently. Because domestic work visas were supposed to be obtained only through the stipulated public sector agencies or directly from the employer through the online eMigrate system, where they were obtained through social networks and private recruiters, work visas were being camouflaged as visit visas to facilitate the travel.

Under the new regime, women have continued to travel overseas by using older irregular practices such as "pushing", which refers to a practice of bribing the concerned official at airports to allow women to go through emigration without the mandatory emigration clearance from the government. Until the 1990s, women travelled mostly to Bombay for emigration and in the first decade of 2000, they were exiting the country from airports closer to the sending regions. But after the recent changes in regulation, women from Kerala and AP have been travelling to distant airports such as Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Delhi and Bombay but also Chennai and Bengaluru to evade the increased vigilance of government officials. The changes in the routes that women traversed to exit the country show that the airports from where "pushing" was availed changed continuously.

The scarcity of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East in the past decade has occasioned changes in long-established recruitment practices. Corresponding to these changes, there was a noticeable perception in the source regions that visas were easily available. It was also striking that most of the women who had migrated in recent years did not incur expenses on migration. This is remarkable because the extraction of disproportionately large sums of money as migration expenses has been a widely noted aspect of exploitation.

Of the six public sector agencies that have been mandated with exclusive rights to recruit

women domestic workers, three agencies had commenced organized recruitment at the time of writing – Non Resident Keralites Association ROOTS (NORKA ROOTS) in Kerala, Overseas Manpower Corporation of Andhra Pradesh (OMCAP) in AP, Telangana Overseas Manpower Company Ltd., (TOMCOM) in Telangana. NORKA was the first to begin recruitment after it signed an MOU in April 2018 with Al-Durra, a semi-government recruiting agency in Kuwait to recruit 500 women workers. It was striking, however, that NORKA experienced tremendous difficulty in mobilizing sufficient candidates to meet the demand from Al-Durra even though women had been obtaining visas and migrating with the assistance of private intermediaries.

Perhaps the most important reason for NORKA's difficulties was that it had not bridged the social distance between government agencies and migrant women. Social distance shaped by class and caste prejudice was apparent as public sector recruiting agencies had until recently refused to recruit women domestic workers, and government officials had expressed derogatory views about women domestic workers. Officials of public sector agencies tended to view women domestic workers through the prism of patriarchal and nationalist public opinion. At the time of the fieldwork, NORKA's outreach in the sending areas was weak and certainly no match for local intermediaries, who were mostly of the same social class as the women they recruited.

Women migrants who were interviewed were not easily convinced about the wisdom of seeking opportunities through NORKA. Many of them had not even heard of NORKA, not to mention the recruitment scheme initiated by the agency. Even when they were made aware of NORKA's scheme, there were other reasons for their disinterest. One reason was their closeness to local intermediaries, which generated trust. Another was that a section of workers sought employment on the informal markets in the destination, which was mostly irregular and could not be offered by NORKA. The employment of domestic workers on the informal market in the destination has been widely documented and a section of women aspirants are known to prefer it because it offers greater flexibility in conditions of work as well as higher returns.

TThe paper also discusses the implications that long-term protectionism has had on women's labour market prospects in the destination as wage rates for migrant women from India were lower than those for women from the Philippines and Indonesia. Interviews showed that Indian women may be required to work equally hard and may even be entrusted with greater responsibility than Filipina co-workers, but they were likely to be paid less. Ironically, if one of the rationales for Indian protectionism was that as an emerging power, India did not want to be seen as a source of "poor" or "low-skilled" women workers, in practice, protectionism had led to the perception (at least among domestic workers in the destination) that the inferior condition of Indian women workers was the result of a weak and non-assertive government.

1. Introduction

Women migrants, who are employed as domestic workers in the Middle East, enjoy a dubious visibility in India because narratives of harassment and abuse dominate public discourse and spawn abject and derogatory perceptions of them. "Problem narratives" have become a way of speaking about migrant domestic work in the Middle East.[1] These narratives are built around twin stereotypes of women workers as either helpless and incapable of coping with the demands of employment in the Middle East or as a shadowy other, the licentious and sexually-permissive woman, who is willing to do what it takes to survive and succeed. However, migrant women reported diverse and varied experiences even as they sought to distance themselves from overarching representations of their experiences. A repeated refrain heard from respondent migrant women in Kerala was "But I did not have problems" (*Pakshe enikke prasnam undayirunilla)*. As respondents did not deny the tough work conditions in the Middle East or hesitate to speak of their struggles, their disclaimers suggested that they were apprehensive about how they would be perceived and signalled an uneasiness with a societal gaze that positioned them ambiguously in relation to extant gender norms.

Domestic workers usually migrate without their spouses, and they live and work in close proximity of men within the homes of their employers. As a result, in the source regions of Kerala and AP, where fieldwork for this study was conducted, migration for domestic work

A repeated refrain heard from respondent migrant women in Kerala was 'But I did not have problems' (*Pakshe enikke prasnam undayirunilla*).

was associated with the loss of sexual control over women.[2] Migrant women domestic workers (MWDWs) are perceived in derogatory terms, but there were telling differences in the scale at which these perceptions operated in the source regions and consequently in their power to influence migrant behaviour. For example, migrant workers and their families in AP were much less concerned about stories of illicit wealth earned overseas than they were in Kerala. Stigma, in the sense of a "spoiled" or blemished identity[3] was prevalent within the major sending communities in Kerala, subjecting migrant women to shame and making them secretive about their migration plans and experiences, but in AP, it was rooted outside the major sending communities and not within them.

Much of the large volume of research on international migration from India has an implicit focus on male workers.[4] Swamped by male-dominated flows, women's emigration has attracted little scholarly attention, especially when it is for employment in "low-skilled" occupations.[5] As a result, problem narratives

1 Referring to the employment of Indian domestic workers in Oman, Mehta (2015) uses the term "crisis narratives" to underline how the theme of harassment dominates and conceals the multiple and layered experiences of the workers. The term "problem narratives" conveys something similar yet is distinct and closer to the Malayalam usage by respondents. In particular, it underlines the pervasiveness of stories of exploitation and abuse and shows how these stories affect the response of MWDWs, leading them to anticipate and refute these narratives.

2 Domestic workers do not usually qualify for family migration, which is conditional on a minimum level of income (Mehta, 2015, Simel and Smith, 2004).

3 Goffman, 1963.

4 For a sample of scholarship on Gulf migration from Kerala, see Prakash (1978), Gopinathan Nair (1998), Kannan, Zachariah and Rajan eds. (2009) and Rajan and Narayana (2010). The continued neglect of women's migration is evident in a recent volume that focuses on India's "low-skilled" migration to the Gulf. The volume, Rajan and Saxena eds. (2019), includes field-based empirical studies from several Indian states but the only paper that deals with the gender dimension of migration analyzes women's narratives from the existing slender body of published research.

5 Analysis of macro-level cross-country data on women's migration does not deal with the specificities of the source contexts in India or the sustained migration of less-qualified women workers despite the policy disincentives that exist. See for instance, Thimothy and Sasikumar (2012), Ghosh (2009), Sijapati (2014), Sijapati and Nair (2014). In contrast to less-qualified or "low-skilled"

have come to dominate and colour the prevalent understanding of recruitment practices and migration patterns of low-skilled women from India.[6] Spatially concentrated in the south Indian states, and within them in contiguous areas, the migration of women domestic workers is underpinned by a strong institutional dimension (as gender norms have influenced policy and shaped migration patterns) that sets it apart from the better known male migration patterns. This paper engages critically with the dominant narratives surrounding women's emigration, juxtaposes them with migrant women's perspectives gathered from source regions of Kerala and AP which have witnessed migration of women domestic workers since the mid-twentieth century, and provides an overview of women's recruitment and migration for domestic work.[7]

The official enumeration of migrant workers is seriously flawed and has led to a form of statistical invisibility of women. In general, official statistics underestimate the flows of low-skilled workers because they do not include irregular mobility, which is believed to be considerable. In addition, gender-differentiated official statistics are available only for the past decade. Large-scale surveys also underestimate the migration of women domestic workers because of spatial clustering.[8] Further, official statistics pertain to only those migrants who hold emigration check required (ECR) passports, a reference to a class of workers who are designated as vulnerable and marked out for "protection" on account of their lack of a stipulated level of education. At present, the ECR category comprises citizens who have not completed ten years of schooling.[9] MWDWs usually fall within the purview of the ECR category as they rarely have higher education and additionally, they are subject to extended measures of "protection".[10] Emigration clearance is granted or denied by the Protector of Emigrants (POE), who has discretionary powers, based on scrutiny of documents submitted by the aspirants. In practice, however, the promise of protection is vague and evasive because it is based on the idea that preventing the migration of those who do not possess the required documents will protect them from harm, but it says little about how the state will protect those who qualify for emigration clearance when they arrive in the destination.

Government policies as well as the social contexts in source regions/origin countries influence gendered migration patterns and women's experiences of migration, but migration also responds to economics (demand and supply/push and pull), the dynamism of the recruitment industry, and the accumulated historical connections and networks between source regions and destination countries. The pull factors merit special emphasis in the case of the Middle East because of the way labour market demand expanded following the oil boom of the 1970s and generated large-scale labour recruitment and migration.

Women's migration as domestic workers also gained momentum with the economic boom in the 1970s. Previously, domestic workers were employed by wealthy families in the Middle East,

migrants, a specialized literature has evolved in the past two decades on the migration of women in skilled occupations, especially that of nurses and information technology (IT) professionals (see Umadevi, 2002; Raghuram, 2000; 2004, Roos, H., 2013; Kalpagam 2006; Percot 2006; George, 2000; Walton-Roberts, 2012; Kodoth and Kuriakose 2013).

6 For field-based research in the source regions of migration of low-skilled women workers from India, see Pattadath and Moors (2012) and Kodoth (2016, 2018).

7 Kerala, Goa and undivided Andhra Pradesh, including Hyderabad, find mention as the conventional sources of migration to the Middle East, see Weiner (1982), Sabika al-Najjar (2005: 26), Leonard (2002), Kanchana (2017), Pattadath and Moors (2012) and Kodoth (2014, 2016 a). There has been some expansion of the source regions. For instance, women from Tamil Nadu migrated as domestic workers largely to Southeast Asian destinations, especially Singapore and Malaysia, but an incident in September 2015 in which a Tamil woman in Saudi Arabia was severely injured, brought the spotlight on migration from Tamil Nadu to the Middle East. Vellore district in Tamil Nadu was identified as an important source (see Subramaniam, 2015; Bhattacharjee, 2015).

8 Several rounds of large-scale surveys of migration from Kerala, which were conducted from 1998, are beset by this problem. These surveys have shown that only between 10 and 15 per cent of emigrants are women and that only about half of these women migrate as workers (Zachariah and Rajan, 2009) but they are better able to capture male migration, which is more evenly distributed in the state than women's emigration.

9 The ECR designation applies only for employment in 18 countries that are marred by poor working conditions and includes all the Middle Eastern countries.

10 For a detailed description of how the ECR category has been operationalized with respect to women emigrants, see Kodoth and Varghese (2012). The paper also analyzes the cultural underpinnings of restrictions on women's mobility. Oishi (2005) provides a comparative analysis of gendered restrictions by sending countries in Asia and their effects.

and it was a marker of social status to employ a migrant domestic worker. However, as women nationals began to take up employment, the demand for migrant domestic workers also increased. Policies to encourage the employment of nationals in the Middle East have slowed down migration in the past decade and affected the demand for male migrants. The demand for domestic workers, however, has continued to grow in response to demographic changes as well as rising women's work participation rates among nationals.[11] As a result, in the past decade, Middle Eastern countries have been pressing for increased flows of domestic workers from existing sources as well as scouting for new sources to meet the growing demand.[12]

In this situation of flux, countries in Asia have altered their strategies. When most source countries have taken measures to adopt more open policies, India seems to have embraced an anti-trafficking perspective more fully in the past decade. The stated premise of India's long-term policy has been to discourage the mobility of women as domestic workers.[13] However, in 2014, India took the unprecedented step of signing an agreement to facilitate the migration of domestic workers to Saudi Arabia.

In August 2016, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of the Government of India (GOI) stipulated that the recruitment of MWDWs to ECR countries would be permitted through only six notified public sector agencies or directly by foreign employers through the government's online eMigrate system. These changes initiated a complete ban on recruitment by private agencies, even as generic conditions for recruitment of MWDWs such as the minimum age of 30 years continued to apply. However, the number of emigration clearances granted to women, i.e., the number of women migrating through regular channels each year had begun to decline in 2011, when the Indian government stipulated that to recruit a MWDW from the country, a sponsor must provide a refundable bank guarantee of $2,500, as a security deposit to the Indian embassy in the destination country to be used to repatriate the worker if the need arises.

A protectionist approach has contributed to the construction of women's migration as a social problem in India and has influenced the nature of recruitment. The restrictions imposed by the Indian government have generated incentives for even licensed recruitment agencies to resort to irregular practices and to recruit unofficially in order to evade accountability. In practice, therefore, the ban on private recruitment agencies in 2016 may have had little practical impact on the nature of recruitment, already marked by irregularities.

At the same time, there has been a growing acknowledgment globally of the failures of an anti-trafficking perspective to understand the migration of women.[14] In South Asia, Bangladesh began to permit the migration of low-skilled women workers in the early 2000s, and is currently witnessing a surge of outflows even as migrants struggle to make good in the difficult

11 Tayah and Assaf (2018) call for more attention to socio-demographic changes in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which are likely to have important implications for the demand for domestic workers who numbered 3.77 million in the region in 2016.

12 Labour migration from Africa has witnessed an upward trend, as seen in a recent ITUC-Africa study: http://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_study-africa_labour_migration_to_the_gcc_states.pdf. It was reported in October 2018 that Al Durra, a recruitment agency formed in Kuwait specifically to recruit domestic workers and bring down the cost of employing them, would soon begin recruitment from Burkino Faso, Vietnam, Nepal and Ethiopia (Arabtimes online.com). Cambodia entered into an agreement to send 10,000 women as domestic workers to Kuwait and about 4,000 workers have left so far (CATU, 2019).

13 India's policy stance on MWDWs has been discussed in Oishi (2002), Kodoth and Varghese (2012) and Kodoth (2016). India's approach to MWDWs in the Middle East derives from a broader policy-level distinction made towards overseas Indians between the diaspora, a reference largely to more affluent and celebrated migrants in the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries), and migrant workers in the Middle East, who form the bulk of non-resident Indians (NRIs) but wield much less influence with the Indian government. The latter are addressed largely from a victimization perspective, through instruments designed to prevent trafficking (Jha, 2014; Sijapati and Nair, 2014). The reference to the diaspora in the OECD includes both NRIs and persons of Indian origin, who may be citizens of the destination countries.

14 This shift in perspective has been led by international agencies calling for safe, orderly and humane migration (see UN, 2015; ILO, 2014). For an account of what safe migration strategies have entailed and their limitations in protecting the rights of migrant workers, see Molland (2015). Scholars have analyzed the assumptions underpinning anti-trafficking approaches and demonstrated the difficulties that policies based on them create for women migrants. For work with reference to the effects of an anti-trafficking approach to the migration of women from Nepal, see O"Neill (2001, 2007). Mahdavi (2011, 2013) engages with the effects of the approach in the Middle East.

conditions of overseas employment.[15] Nepal also lifted prohibition on the mobility of women as domestic workers in 2011, only to impose a ban again in August 2017.[16] But governments in Bangladesh and Nepal have begun to put infrastructure in place to recruit and train migrant workers in response to pressure from civil society organisations and trade unions to adopt policies that uphold migrant rights.

Irrespective of their policy stance, however, most origin countries have resorted to restrictions and prohibition against the migration of women domestic workers from time to time. The major source countries of MWDWs in the Middle East until now, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, have imposed restrictions and prohibitions in response to the harsh treatment of workers and used these to bargain with destination countries for better working conditions.[17] Sri Lanka, which opened its doors for women's migration in the 1980s and witnessed a feminisation of migration, began to promote male migration in the 2000s and has since placed restrictions on women's migration reducing their share in total migrants to below 50 per cent.[18] Nevertheless, Sri Lanka's experience with an open policy showed that feminisation diversified the social profile of migrant women and reduced stigma.[19]

The Philippines' experience offers particularly useful insights into the costs and benefits of a proactively promotion policy. The failure of the Philippines government to generate employment opportunities at home has brought pressure on women to migrate, thus constraining their choices. However, sustained government support also strengthened the collective clout of migrant Filipina women, enabling them to negotiate with their government and shape migration policy in their interests.[20] The Philippines has the most extensive infrastructure in place to protect migrant workers in the Middle East. Because the Philippines government is proactive in this regard, the experiences of abuse by Filipina domestic workers illustrate the limits of source country policies in protecting workers rights in the destination countries and also underline the systemic nature of the abuse of migrant workers in the Middle East.[21]

Violations of the labour rights of domestic workers in the Middle East are rooted in the Kafala system of recruitment and sponsorship, which gives employers extraordinary power over migrant workers. In addition, domestic workers are excluded from the purview of labour laws in the Middle Eastern countries.[22] Domestic workers have also been excluded from most of the recent reforms, which have altered the severity of the sponsorship system in some of the Middle Eastern countries. Hence, problems arising from the legal framework in the Middle East have rendered migrant workers dependent on individualized strategies to make gains on

15 Bangladesh signed an MOU with Jordan in 2012 and with Saudi Arabia in 2015 to facilitate the mobility of domestic workers. Restrictions were relaxed from the mid-2000s, and the migration of women workers more than doubled from about 37,000 in 2012 to 76,000 in 2014 and from 103,718 in 2015 to 121,925 in 2017. In 2017, 83,354 women were employed in Saudi Arabia, accounting for two out of every three Bangladeshi women workers overseas (Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), cited in *Dhaka Tribune*, 28 March 2018).

16 A 120 per cent increase in female migrants in 2010–11 was attributed by the Nepal government to the lifting of the ban on women migrating as domestic workers to the Middle East (ILO, 2017). Nepal's experience showed that prohibition only re-routes migration through India with which it shares an open border. Circumvention of the ban by the Nepal government by travelling through airports in India is evident also since the most recent ban.

17 The levels of restrictions have varied depending on the political regimes in the country of origin but also on the relative power of public opinion and the voice of domestic workers. For a discussion of restrictions by different countries, see Oishi (2005), Ireland (2018) and Kodoth (2016a).

18 By the late 1990s, 80 per cent of the migrants from the country were women and they were mostly domestic workers.

19 See discussion in Oishi (2005: 160)

20 A comparison of the experiences of Sri Lanka and the Philippines showed that the policies of the Philippines have contributed to building the bargaining power of Filipina workers (Ireland, 2018). There is a large volume of literature on migrant women's experiences as well as the "social" costs of migration from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, which experienced the feminization of migration by the 1980s (Gamburd, 1999; Irianto and Troung, 2014; Battistella and Asis, 2011). Comparative research underlines how policies and outcomes may be linked to gender norms and conditions in the countries of origin (Oishi, 2005; UNESCAP, 2008).

21 See Ireland (2018).

22 For a discussion with reference to the GCC, see Kapiszewski (2006) and Simel and Smith eds. (2005). Scholars have also analyzed how the Kafala system generates structural violence against migrant workers, see Gardner (2010) and with specific reference to domestic workers, see Pande (2013).

the labour markets there.[23] In this context, investments in education, skills and language training over the long term have given Filipina workers access to better jobs and higher wages. In sharp contrast, there has been a long-term decline in the prospects of Indian women, who enjoyed a privileged position on the labour markets of the Middle East until the 1970s.[24]

In the past decade, the Indian government has stepped up the rhetoric of "protection" even as policy changes have made room for ambiguity. The government has resorted to complex manoeuvres to reconcile the patriarchal and nationalist impulses of the domestic public, which are in favour of restrictions, with the demands from destination countries for increased supply of MWDWs. For instance, governments in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have sought to leverage India's substantial commercial interests in their countries to increase access to MWDWs from India. The domestic workers' mobility agreement signed with Saudi Arabia in December 2014 is a case in point and, notably, it is a fundamental departure from India's long-standing position to discourage such mobility.

Further, three Indian public sector agencies, NORKA ROOTS in Kerala, OMCAP and TOMCOM have signed MOUs with the Al-Durra Home Employment Co. in Kuwait (henceforth Al-Durra), a government-supported recruitment agency, to recruit MWDWs since 2018, when Kuwait has been facing severe shortages of MWDWs.[25]

The entry of public sector agencies could have infused a beneficial dynamic into an admittedly messy sector, but the ban on private recruitment ended the possibility of inducing open competition or regulating the activities of private recruiters. Public sector agencies are hamstrung by their lack of experience in the organized recruitment of MWDWs and also have limited capacity to do so. The first Indian public sector agency to begin recruiting MWDWs for Al-Durra, NORKA in Kerala, has been struggling to mobilize the required number of candidates. The agency had agreed to recruit 500 women in April 2018 but had been able to send only about 350 workers by January 2020.

This background paper seeks to understand how government policy, local conditions, including institutions, which affect perceptions and attitudes, as well as social networks and an amorphous recruitment industry have shaped women's mobility. As an entry point into the structural and institutional dimensions of migration, the paper poses three basic questions.

- 1. Who goes to the Middle East as domestic workers or what are the socio-economic, demographic and other characteristics of MWDWs who go to the Middle East? What do these characteristics tell us about the dynamics of women's migration and the resources and identities women mobilize to gain access to migrant jobs?
- 2. How do women migrate? How do they obtain overseas employment and make their way overseas especially in the face of an adverse emigration policy? Is their mobility the result of disorderly random processes at work or is it organized?
- 3. Where do women migrate to? Which are the main destinations of MWDWs who go to the Middle East and how can the pattern of flows be explained?

In addition, the paper will also look at the spatial clustering of women's migration in specific regions and explore how MWDWs have been negotiating the current ban on private recruitment. To explore the above-mentioned questions and issues, the paper draws upon

23 Taking note of the growing demand for domestic workers in the Middle East and to improve migrant workers' experiences, Tayah and Assaf (2018) underline the importance of matching skills of immigrant workers with the requirements of employers.

24 There is extensive documentation of the ethnic and racial coding of women on the labour market reflected in differential wage rates (IHRC, 2013: 24; Ireland, 2013: 13; Moors et. al., 2009: 153; Sabban, 2004: 102; Sabika al-Najjar, 2004).

25 The first of these MOUs was signed with NORKA ROOTS, a public sector undertaking under the Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs, Government of Kerala, in April 2018. It followed the resolution of an impasse because Kuwait retaliated against the enforcement of the bank guarantee for employment by India with a ban on Indian MWDWs in 2015. But the circumstances in which the MOU was signed were somewhat more complicated. At the time, NORKA was also struggling to persuade Kuwait to lift the ban on nurses from India. The migration of nurses is a politically sensitive issue in Kerala, which is the biggest origin state of migrant nurses in India and also because a large section of migrant nurses are from a politically influential community (the Syrian Christians). Kuwait is a major destination for migrant nurses from Kerala, and hence the ban had raised heightened concerns in Kerala. Coming when it did, the MOU with Al-Durra raised questions about the pressures that NORKA may have been under to take a step that it had decidedly avoided so far. For further analysis, see Kodoth (2018, 2020).

material collected through fieldwork in Kerala and AP between 2013 and 2019.

Before going any further, it must be mentioned that the problems that affect women's emigration cannot be reduced to irregular migration or unauthorised recruitment. With decades of experience with international migration, people in the source regions are not unaware, at least intuitively, that regular channels do not necessarily protect migrant workers and irregular migration is not always unsafe.[26] But the distinction between regular migration and irregular practices is also unstable. Once a woman migrant is in the Middle East, it is her visa and her residence permit (*iquama*) that determines her legal status and not whether she had been granted emigration clearance from the POE. Like better qualified migrants, women in the ECR category also go on visit visas either to take up jobs or to search for them, aware that they can transition to work visas later.

Migrant domestic workers may not be fully acquainted with the intricacies of regulations, but they are not unaware of the risks associated with employment in the Middle East. Frequent changes in legal requirements, a preponderance of irregular recruiters who act in association with rent-seeking government officials and significant information asymmetry has created an opaque regulatory environment in which aspiring women may find it difficult to differentiate between credible and unscrupulous intermediaries. As women pursue their aspirations in the shadow of the state with the means available to them, they may be unwilling to listen to "wise" counsel. For those who seek a more detailed explanation for why women are not deterred, it may be that problem narratives are so pervasive, excessive and flawed that they have lost their sting. Considered in this light, women's mobility is subversive; it does not directly challenge regulation but undermines it and questions the dominant patriarchal and nationalist values implicit in it.

Considered in this light, women's mobility is subversive; it does not directly challenge regulation but undermines it and questions the dominant patriarchal and nationalist values implicit in it.

This paper is organized in seven chapters. The next chapter provides a description of the fieldwork and research material. Chapter 3 examines the first set of questions that seek to identify who the women who choose to migrate as MWDWs from AP and Kerala are and provides a comparative analysis of their characteristics. In Chapter 4, the recruitment of and travel by MWDWs are analyzed with a focus on intermediation by a diverse set of recruiters and other service providers as well as social and personal networks. Chapter 5 deals with the destinations of MWDWs and examines the migration patterns between source areas and destination countries in the light of established networks and connections.

Mobility in the altered regulatory context since 2014 is the focus of discussion in Chapter 6. While official statistics are likely to underrepresent migration, material generated through fieldwork in 2019 throws light on the processes that enable migration in the new context of heightened restrictions. It also addresses the question of why MWDWs may continue to migrate through private intermediaries even when public sector agencies have opened their doors to recruit them. The last chapter restates the questions that guided this inquiry and summarizes the findings.

26 This critique of state-centred approaches is substantiated in scholarship on cross-border migration in South-East Asia. For example, see Molland (2012) and Bylander (2019). Studies on the migration of Indian domestic workers to the Middle East show that irregular migration is not necessarily experienced as unsafe, but also that irregular employment in part-time jobs may be more remunerative (Pattadath and Moors, 2012; Kodoth, 2018). This critique forms part of safe migration briefs by the ILO (ILO, 2014).

2. Description of the fieldwork and research material

This paper builds on analyses of primary material generated through fieldwork in specific regions of Kerala and AP between 2013 and 2019 and of secondary sources, including emigration clearance granted data, government orders, other material from the MEA website and other published sources. For the sake of descriptive convenience, the fieldwork has been classified into three phases conducted over 2013–14, 2015–18 and 2019. The first phase provided a base for understanding the profile and nature of women's migration from Kerala and AP. In this phase, field work was conducted in four districts, Trivandrum and Malappuram in Kerala and East Godavari and henceforth Kadapa in AP.[27] To avoid confusion, the reference to Kadapa is not to the district headquarters of the same name but to one taluk that did not include the district headquarters.

The fieldwork comprised a sample survey of migrant workers and semi-structured interviews, along with informal conversations with a range of stakeholders including emigrant and returnee workers. Going beyond the nature and processes of migration and women's experiences of migration, the question of how women's migration took root was also explored, focusing on two of the selected regions, Trivandrum and East Godavari.

In the second phase in 2015–18, interviews were conducted as the opportunity arose; for instance, when it was learnt that workers had returned home to Trivandrum without completing their tenure. Interactions with these returnee MWDWs focused on understanding the implications of changes in regulation for recruitment practices. Interviews and informal conversations were also conducted during 2015–18 with government officials and private recruiters. The most recent phase of fieldwork, conducted over May and June 2019, comprised interviews with emigrant and returnee workers and/or their family members and other stakeholders in East Godavari in AP and three districts in Kerala.

2.1. Choice of study areas

Kerala and AP were chosen based on collated information from the POEs, migration activists and reports from destination sources. These sources indicated that AP was the largest source state of MWDWs in the ECR category in 2013 at the time of the fieldwork, and that Kerala had been a consistent source of MWDWs for several decades. Official data was not available in a consolidated form in 2013, but it is now available on the MEA's eMigrate website for the top 25 sending districts of women in the ECR category from 2007 onwards. While the ECR statistics may underestimate women's migration by a wide margin because of considerable irregular migration, it does still show clustering within the southern states. The ECR statistics provided a reasonably good indication of the regional distribution of women emigrants until 2014 when the condition that sponsors must provide a bank guarantee of $2,500 to recruit an Indian woman domestic worker (followed by recruitment exclusively by the public sector agencies in 2016) skewed the picture.[28]

As is evident in Table 2.1, AP accounted for a disproportionately large share of emigration clearances granted to women between 2007 and 2014, and the Godavari districts (East and West) in AP accounted for over two-thirds of all women who received emigration clearance during this period. Apart from the Godavari districts and Kadapa district in Andhra Pradesh, several districts of Kerala, as well as districts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka that share borders with Kerala, were among the top sending districts of

27 Any references to Trivandrum, Malappuram, East Godavari and Kadapa are to the field sites within these districts unless otherwise specified.

28 The chief executive officer of OMCAP, the public sector recruiting agency of AP, estimated that there were 0.5 million women from AP working as domestic workers in the Gulf. "Every year nearly 30,000–40,000 housemaids go to the Gulf. Of them, 60–70 per cent are from Kadapa and East and West Godavari districts." Speaking to a journalist when the government was considering a ban on women's emigration, he cautioned that such a step would lead to a loss of 5000 million Indian rupees a month for the state (Varma, 2015).

TABLE 2.1. NUMBER OF EMIGRATION CLEARANCES GRANTED TO WOMEN FROM eMIGRATE*

Year	EC to women from the top 25 sending districts from India, eMigrate							Directly from the PGE**	
	Kuwait	Oman	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Qatar	Bahrain	All ECR Countries	From Godavari***	EC to the GCC Countries***
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2008	1 251	4 315	609	34	20	114	6 352	4 660 (73.0)	11 901 (28%, 56%)
2009	4 402	4 659	735	52	12	90	9 958	7 549 (75.8)	17 880 (54%, 37%)
2010	5 808	3 974	696	88	26	79	10 718	7 906 (73.8)	19 681 (60%, 30%)
2011	4 387	1 805	732	79	32	41	7 042	4 779 (67.9)	
2012	6 856	249	824	107	8	46	8 094	5 654 (69.9)	
2013	8 919	237	915	64	11	34	10 192	7 537 (74.0)	
2014	6 793	204	859	7	9	50	7 929	4 874 (61.5)	
2015	69	253	623	156	10	53	1 167	99 (08.5)	
2016	14	234	493	154	7	46	950	60 (06.32)	
2017	0	127	402	51	2	41	631	27 (04.28)	
2018	29	68	209	1	2	32	345	0 (0)	
2019	496#	45	99	0	6	20	669	94 (14.5)	

Source: *eMigrate, Ministry of External Affairs
** This data has been sourced directly from the PGE by Ponturu (2016).
*** Figures in parenthesis in Column 9 are the proportions of women from Godavari region who received emigration clearance and in Column 10 they are the percentages of emigration clearances granted to women to go to Kuwait and Oman respectively.
# The surge in recruitment to Kuwait in 2019 is largely from Kadapa after OMCAP had begun to recruit in an organised manner.

women in the ECR category.[29] The migration of women from Hyderabad, Chennai and Mumbai too was evident in the list of top sending districts.

Table 2.1 also draws attention to some of the discrepancies in the ECR data. The numbers of emigration clearances granted in Column 10 of the table for the years 2008–10, which were obtained directly from the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE), are almost twice those reported on the eMigrate website. These figures suggest that the scale of migration could be significantly larger than is evident from eMigrate numbers. There are also incongruities in the destinations and source districts that accounted for a large share of emigration clearances granted to women in the years following changes in regulation. The enforcement of the security deposit of $2,500 in 2011 did not affect the total number of emigration clearances granted to women until 2014 because Kuwait was exempted from it. However, from 2008–09, the major destination for women shifted from Oman to Kuwait until Kuwait banned inflows of Indian MWDWs in 2015. Following this, the total emigration clearance granted to ECR countries dipped to below 1,000.

Under the present rules, recruitment through notified public sector agencies exempts sponsors from paying the security deposit, but foreign employers who recruit directly through the eMigrate system must continue to observe the provision.[30] The table also shows that emigration clearances granted to women from the Godavari districts plummeted from accounting for over 60 per cent of the total until 2014 to 10 per cent in the succeeding years.

For the first time in a decade, in 2018, the Godavari districts were not among the top 25

29 Goa and a couple of districts from Maharashtra also figure in the top 25 districts. Goa has been an important source from the early decades, but like Kerala, migration from Goa is more diverse in terms of occupations within the low-skilled category compared to AP.

30 MEA circular dated 1 September 2017, Z-11025/89/2017-OE-III. The government explained that "[e]mployers of female domestic workers and Recruitment Agencies, have been pointing out that the financial guarantee ... has been a key factor in discouraging recruitment of Indian female domestic workers through eMigrate system", press release, Embassy of India in Oman, dated 18 September 2017. See also notifications by the Embassy of India in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

sending districts from India, although observers maintained that there was no real decline in the number of women from these districts who were taking up overseas jobs, and this was also the view of human rights and migrant rights activists familiar with migration from the area. News reports in the past five years have highlighted a perceived increase in migration through irregular channels. This suggests that migration may have changed course from regular to irregular routes.[31]

With total emigration clearance figures falling below 1,000 after 2015, Kerala emerged as the source of the largest number of MWDWs, and its districts were widely represented among the top 25 sending districts. In 2018, all 14 districts of Kerala were among the top 25 source districts. One reason for this is that NORKA, which had previously recruited domestic workers only on demand from individual employers, i.e., mostly Indian nationals in the Middle East, started organised recruitment of MWDWs to Kuwait in 2018.

Table 2.1 shows that there was a sudden spurt in emigration clearances granted to women bound for Kuwait in 2019. This is on account of recruitment occurring mostly from Kadapa district and coincides with the entry of OMCAP into organised recruitment.[32] After OMCAP began recruitment in 2019, YSR Kadapa district emerged as the largest source district in the country, accounting for 33 per cent of all emigration clearances granted to women. It was followed by the two Godavari districts, which together accounted for about 15 per cent of emigration clearances granted to women.

In the first phase of fieldwork conducted in 2013–14, the sample survey and interviews with MWDWs were conducted in the East Godavari and Kadapa districts in AP, and the Trivandrum and Malappuram districts in Kerala. The fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2018 was undertaken entirely in Trivandrum. In 2019, interviews were conducted with MWDWs in AP and Kerala, but they were limited to East Godavari district in AP whereas in Kerala, interviewees included women from three districts – Kollam, Ernakulum and Malappuram. All the respondents from Ernakulum were interviewed on the phone or on social media, whereas the respondents from Kollam included those who were interviewed in their homes as well as on the phone or social media.

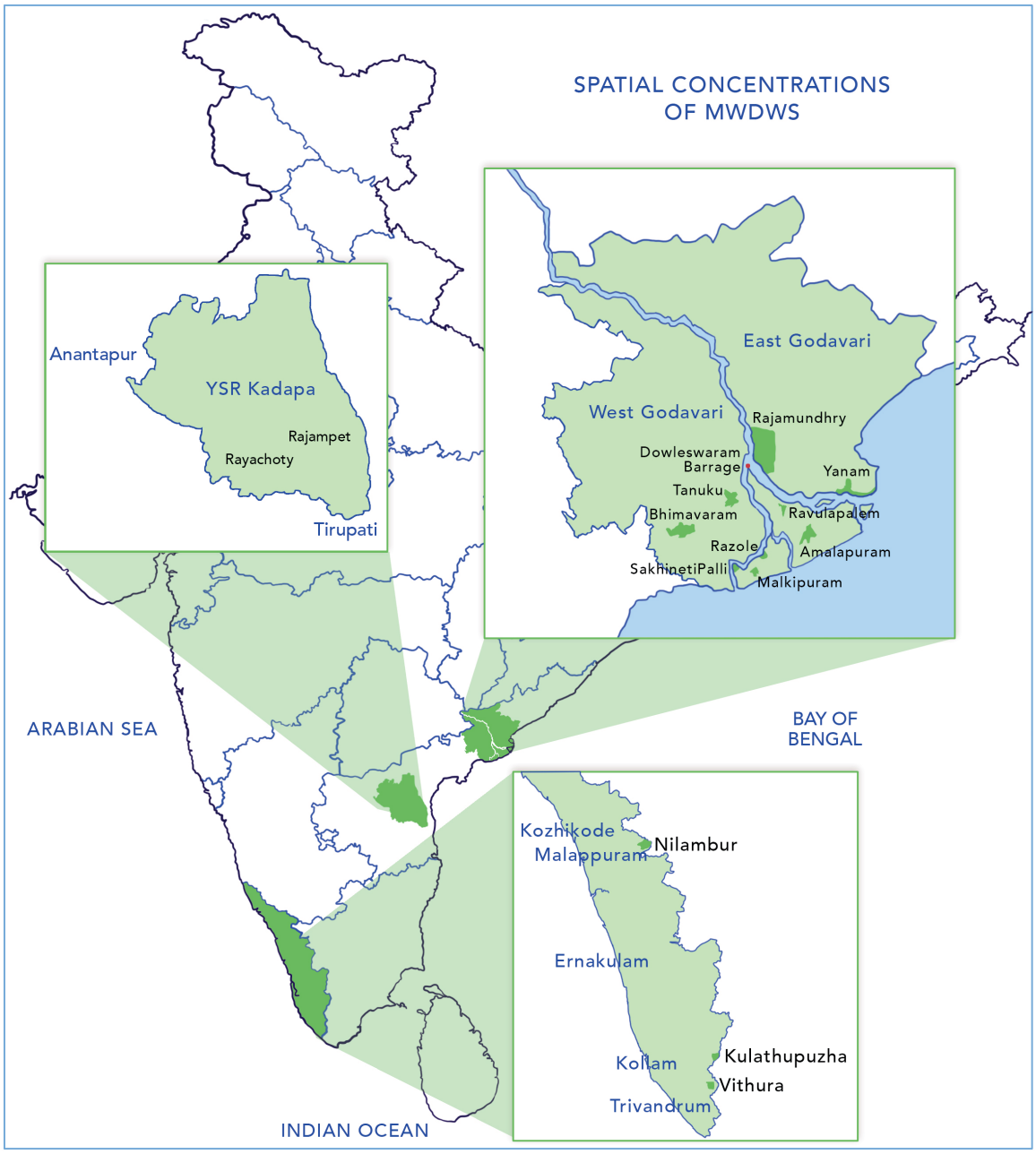
2.2 Fieldwork 2013–14

The primary survey conducted during the first phase of fieldwork had a sample of 502 women workers comprising currently emigrant and returnee workers. Only those workers who had returned in 2008 or later, i.e., within the five years immediately preceding the survey, were included in the sample, but this was irrespective of when they had started migrating. The sample was drawn using the snowballing technique with the help of resource persons and respondents in the field who identified emigrant and returnee workers. It was distributed over one taluk each in East Godavari (198 women) and Kadapa districts (100 women) and three taluks each in Trivandrum (150 women) and Malappuram districts (54 women). In AP, the sample survey and interviews were completed in 2013, but in Kerala, though the bulk of the work was done in 2013, both the survey and interviews were completed in April 2014.

In AP, the survey was conducted with the help of research assistants from the two sites over roughly three months in each site in 2013. The author, who was the principal investigator, visited East Godavari three times and Kadapa two times in 2013 to participate in the survey and to conduct interviews with a sub-sample of survey respondents. In addition, interviews were conducted also with women from both sites in AP who had returned earlier than 2008. This included women who had migrated in the early 1970s. Information was gathered from the family members of currently emigrant women. These women were overseas, hence we interviewed

31 In June 2019, most interviewees from East Godavari who had migrated on new visas after 2014 had used irregular routes. In a few cases, respondents said they "had obtained emigration [clearance]" at the airport, indicating that they may be referring to emigration at the airport and not emigration clearance from the POE. None of them had been recruited through public sector agencies, but it was not possible to ascertain whether they were directly recruited by the sponsor through the eMigrate system. The author was able to verify this only when women showed her their passports, but in several instances, they said their passport was with their agent.

32 Vacancies for "housemaids to Kuwait" is advertised on the website of OMCAP. TOMCOM, the recruitment agency of the state of Telengana, has also begun to recruit for Al-Durra in Kuwait.



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance of it by the United Nations and ILO.

their family members in 2013. In Kerala, the survey information was abstracted from longer interviews. Most of the interviews with workers were done by research assistants, but the author conducted a relatively smaller number of interviews in both districts over 2013–14.

The migration of women was concentrated in the Konaseema delta region of East and West Godavari, and Rayachoty and Rajampet taluks of Kadapa district, and was dispersed with smaller concentrations in contiguous areas and bordering districts. The sample survey and interviews with workers were confined to a single taluk each in the selected districts of AP and spread over three taluks each in the selected districts of Kerala on account of logistical constraints and the greater concentration of migrant women in smaller geographical territories in AP. Notably, there was spatial clustering within district boundaries in AP, but not so in Kerala, where women migrants were more dispersed across the coastal areas, some

of the highland areas and urban slums that cut across districts.[33]

The source regions/study areas were distinct in terms of their agrarian economy and social composition. The Konaseema delta region, which has a concentration of women migrants, extends into West Godavari and projects into the Bay of Bengal. Crisscrossed by the Godavari canal system, this agriculturally fertile region is referred to locally as a "mini Gulf".[34] East Godavari grows paddy (two or three crops) and coconut, and has a relatively higher proportion of SCs in its population.[35] In contrast, Kadapa is an arid, peanut and single-paddy-crop-growing area, and the taluk selected for field work has a relatively higher proportion of Muslims in the population.

From Kerala, Trivandrum district was selected from the south and Malappuram from the north. The northern and southern regions of Kerala correspond to the Malabar district of the erstwhile Madras Presidency and the British residency of Travancore respectively, and are characterized by some notable differences in demography and historical triggers of women's migration. The coastal regions of Trivandrum and Malappuram have witnessed the migration of large numbers of women (the former largely from Catholic and Muslim families and the latter from Muslim families) since the 1950s. A village on the Trivandrum coast that has seen large-scale women's migration is referred to by locals as "Kochu Kuwait" (Little Kuwait). Migrants from the inland and highland populations in both districts were more mixed in terms of religious composition and caste.

During the course of fieldwork, interviews were also conducted with migration intermediaries and government officials in Kerala and AP. Migration intermediaries refers to licensed recruitment agencies and unauthorized actors involved in assisting women who aspire to take up overseas employment. In the licensed category of intermediaries were officials of public sector agencies and private recruitment agents. The unauthorized category of intermediaries comprised travel agents, brokers operating as part of small, independent recruiting networks or acting on their own, as well as itinerant sub-agents, who connected potential migrants to bigger recruiters operating out of offices in the big towns and cities.

Independent brokers included emigrant domestic workers who had obtained visas from their employers and other networks in the destination countries for sale to aspirants in their home regions. Or, they were returnee workers who continued to use their connections in the destination countries to access visas and mobilize workers and channel them overseas. Discussions were conducted with the POEs in Hyderabad and Trivandrum and with activists from migrants' organizations and domestic workers' organizations involved in the rescue of workers from the Middle East and in organising workers at the source.

2.2.1 Description of the sample

Reflecting the larger numbers of women migrants from AP and the relatively greater ease of locating them, roughly three-fifths of the sample (298) was from AP and two-fifths (204) was from Kerala. A broad description of the sample according to the origin states of workers is provided in Table 2.2, which shows the greater momentum of migration from AP in recent decades as compared to Kerala. Of the sample of women migrants from AP, 70 per cent had started emigrating since the year 2000, compared to less than half of the sample of women from Kerala.

The women in the sample undertook a total of 1,792 journeys over the period from 1971 to 2013. The bulk of these journeys were to the Middle East – Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Lebanon – but a small number were to Singapore and Malaysia (72), Israel (12)

33 This is reflected in the official statistics by the presence of a larger number of districts of Kerala among the 25 largest source districts of India.

34 A journalist who has written about migration from the Godavari region in the local Telugu press traced the migration of women to the 1960s and underlined how, in the present context, the ease of getting jobs in the Gulf worked as a disincentive for boys to complete higher education. His father had worked for many years in Kuwait and he dropped out of engineering to try his hand in the Gulf only to return a year later (conversation in February 2013).

35 Scheduled castes are groups that fall at the lowest end of the caste order and have been subject to oppression within the caste system. They are listed in a special schedule under the Constitution and entitled to certain special provisions to compensate for centuries of oppression.

TABLE 2.2: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SAMPLE ACCORDING TO MIGRATION STATUS OF WOMEN AND TRAJECTORIES OF OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT*

Aspects of migration	Categories	Kerala	AP
Migration status of women workers	Currently emigrant, 2013	25.98 (53)	28.86 (86)
	Returned 2012 and 13	27.45 (56)	32.89 (98)
	Returned 2010 and 11	27.94 (57)	23.19 (69)
	Returned 2008 and 09	18.63 (38)	15.10 (45)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Decade of first overseas journey/job	1970–79	0.50 (1)	0.34 (1)
	1980–89	11.76 (24)	3.96 (11)
	1990–99	39.71 (81)	25.84 (77)
	2000–09	38.24 (78)	57.05 (170)
	2010 and after	9.80 (20)	13.09 (39)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Number of journeys of migrant women to each destination	Kuwait	27.2 (239)	47.6 (435)
	UAE	23.6 (207)	14.9 (136)
	Oman	09.7 (85)	12.3 (112)
	Saudi Arabia	19.2 (169)	03.9 (36)
	Qatar	06.6 (58)	13.1 (138)
	Bahrain	02.5 (22)	07.1 (65)
	Others	11.3 (98)	1.0 (09)
	Total	**100 (878)**	**100 (914)**
Total number of years worked by each women	Less than 2 years	11.3 (23)	9.4 (28)
	2 to 5 years	27.0 (55)	27.2 (81)
	5 to 10 years	22.5 (46)	33.6 (100)
	10 to 15 years	26.0 (53)	18.5 (55)
	15 to 20 years	7.4 (15)	9.4 (28)
	Over 20 years	5.9 (12)	2.0 (6)
	Total	**100 (298)**	**100 (204)**
Number of countries worked in by migrant women	One country	45.6 (93)	61.4 (183)
	Two countries	33.8 (69)	26.5 (79)
	Three countries	11.8 (24)	10.4 (31)
	Four or more countries	08.8 (18)	01.6 (05)
	Total	**100**	**100**

Source: Sample survey 2013–14;
*The numbers of migrant women in each category are given in parenthesis

and other destinations (4). Most of the women had made at least one journey to the Middle East. All the journeys captured in the sample were work-related mobility. In addition to these destinations, a smaller number of women from the Trivandrum coast had also migrated to Italy and London and were beginning to go to destinations like Australia and Canada. However, unless they had migrated to the Middle East, these women have not been included in the survey sample.

An interesting dimension that emerges from Table 2.2 is the smaller gap in the number of journeys undertaken by women from the two states compared to the gap in the total number of migrant workers from each state. The data showed that women from Kerala undertook

49 per cent of the total number of journeys though they comprised only 41 per cent of the total women in the sample, whereas women from Andhra Pradesh undertook 51 per cent of journeys though they comprised 59 per cent of women in the sample. This reiterates the greater depth of migration from Kerala and shows that women from Kerala had been migrating repeatedly over a longer period of time as compared to the more recent surge in migration from AP.

It is also notable that 12 per cent of the women from Kerala started to migrate before the 1990s, the comparable proportion from AP was less than 5 per cent (Table 2.2). The migration status of women underlines this difference – it shows that there was a higher proportion of current emigrants and women who had returned in 2012 and 2013 in AP as against a higher proportion of women who had returned between 2008 and 2012 in Kerala.

The sample indicates the depth of migration from the two states as well as the momentum gained or lost over time. For instance, the sample included Sujatha, a domestic worker from East Godavari, who went to Kuwait for the first time in 1971. She returned in 2011 to care for her critically ill son who later died. Subsequently, Sujatha's deceased son's wife also obtained a job as a domestic worker in Bahrain to recoup the expense they had incurred on his medical treatment. Sujatha stayed at home to care for her two school-going grandchildren. She said her daughter-in-law had obtained a visa with the help of a friend in Bahrain, but things had not gone well for her. She was paid less than they had expected and was overworked. Sujatha also said she would like to go back to Kuwait and was waiting for her daughter-in-law to return in order to do so.

Similarly, Leelamma, who is from a coastal village in Trivandrum, had migrated to Kuwait for the first time in 1979, and she had returned only a few months before she was interviewed in 2013. After working in Kuwait for a few years, Leelamma had moved to Lebanon, where she worked for over two decades. During this time, she travelled to France periodically along with her employer's family. She was planning her next journey which she said would be to a different destination. There were several women from coastal Trivandrum who had started their

The sample indicates the depth of migration from the two states as well as the momentum gained or lost over time.

migrant careers in the 1960s and early 1970s, and a few of these women had worked overseas for over four decades. It had not been possible to include them in the sample survey conducted in 2013 because they were overseas at the time. Those who returned subsequently were interviewed in 2016.

The sample includes women at different stages of their overseas careers. A broad sketch of their migration trajectories shows that women persist with overseas employment and may also traverse multiple destinations in the course of their overseas careers. Nearly two-thirds of women from Kerala had worked abroad for over five years and 40 per cent had worked for over 10 years. Women migrants from AP were comparatively younger than those from Kerala and comparatively newer to overseas migration, and yet 55 per cent of these women had worked abroad for more than five years and about 20 per cent had worked for more than ten years. Overall, 43 per cent of women who had migrated after the year 2000 had worked abroad for more than five years.

More than half the women migrants from Kerala (55 per cent) had worked in more than one country as against 40 per cent of women from AP. About 20 per cent of the women from Kerala had worked in three or more countries as against 12 per cent of women from AP. The single largest proportion of women from the two states had worked only in one country, but this was significantly higher for AP than for Kerala and must be seen in association with the age-pattern of workers as will be discussed later in Chapter 3. The reasons for women moving from one destination country to another varied. This could be the result of their dependence on brokers repeatedly to obtain visas, their own desire to move out of a specific country after having had a bad experience there, because they moved to join a family member in another country, or simply on account of a sense of adventure.

2.3. Subsequent fieldwork (2015–18 and 2019)

The second phase of field work (2015–18) included semi-structured interviews with women who had migrated in the early years (1960s and 1970s) and/or their family members, and with women who had obtained visas and travelled overseas after the changes in regulation introduced in 2014, which culminated in the ban on private intermediaries in 2016. During this phase, women migrants were interviewed only in Trivandrum, but research material was also generated through less formal interactions with a representative of an association of private recruitment agents in AP and the officials of public sector recruitment agencies in both AP and Kerala. In September 2018, NORKA officials in Kerala were interviewed about the initiation of organized recruitment of women after signing a contract with Al-Durra, the domestic workers recruitment agency in Kuwait. There were also several follow-up conversations with the concerned officials of the agency.

Interviews were conducted with women from Trivandrum who had migrated in the 1960s and early 1970s between December 2015 and March 2016 to understand the history of women's migration as domestic workers. Eleven of the interviewees were first-generation migrants who had taken up employment in the Middle East in the 1960s and early 1970s, and six of them were daughters of the first-generation migrants. These interviews were conducted in Kochu Kuwait, the village on the Trivandrum coast that has seen a high density of women's migration. Two of these women had returned within the two years (2014–16) that had immediately preceded the interview. Respondents included the daughter and daughter-in-law of a woman who had migrated in 1955 and is remembered as the first MWDW from the village. This woman's daughter-in-law also had migrated in the early 1970s.

In May 2016, a discussion with a group of returnee migrants in a highland village in Trivandrum highlighted some of the implications of the imposition of the security deposit and the ban on migration to Kuwait in 2015.[36] Some of these women also had relatives working overseas at the time. The brother of a woman who was in distressed circumstances in Kuwait at the time and a woman who had returned from Kuwait after having been trafficked by a local broker (she was taken to a brothel but did not come to harm because there was a raid on the evening of the day she was taken there and she was rescued), were also interviewed. In the latter instance the broker was also a migrant from the same village. In February 2017, an interview was conducted with a woman from a coastal village who had migrated in September 2016 after the public sector rule was imposed and returned with the help of the Indian embassy after experiencing severe abuse.

The most recent phase of fieldwork was conducted between May and June 2019. This phase involved interviews with overseas domestic workers, their spouses or other family members, in East Godavari and three districts of Kerala (Kollam, Malappuram and Ernakulum). Also interviewed were travel agents and other migration intermediaries in East Godavari and Malappuram. These interviews were conducted to understand how women obtained visas and made their way to destination countries under the migration regime currently in place.

The details of these interviews are as follows: In Kerala interviews were conducted with migrant domestic workers and/or their family members, two travel agents and the spouses of two local intermediaries. The Kudumbasree network, which mobilizes women into thrift and credit groups across Kerala under a state-government programme, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which organises MWDWs in Kerala and has been engaged in rescuing MWDWs who had experienced abuse in destination countries, as well as local self-government officials, helped identify respondents in the two highland areas of Kollam and Malappuram districts which have a relatively high density of women migrants. MWDWs from Kollam and Ernakulum districts who were in the destination countries were identified through personal networks and interviewed by telephone or on social media.[37]

A total of 22 MWDWs were interviewed during this phase. In addition, the spouse of one MWDW

36 This was a discussion with a group that was part of the trade union formed by SEWA.

37 The interviews with women from Ernakulum district were conducted by an intern.

as well as the mothers of two MWDWs and the sister of an MWDW were interviewed. At the time of the interviews, ten of the workers held jobs in the Middle East (eight were overseas and two were visiting home), 11 had returned home in the two years immediately preceding the interview, and one returnee had obtained a visa and was making preparations to leave. The MWDW whose sister was interviewed was, at the time, facing difficulties with her recruitment agency in Oman. Interactions with SEWA activists in the fieldwork area of Malappuram and Trivandrum were also useful in understanding the dynamics of recruitment as well as rescue and repatriation of MWDWs.

Of 16 respondents from East Godavari, 12 were MWDWs who were at home on vacation at the time or had returned a few years prior to the interview; one was the husband of a woman who was in Qatar and was seeking repatriation; while two were women whose daughters were working in the Middle East. One of the two women was a MWDW herself and was at home to attend to her younger daughter's delivery. She held a job in Dubai in the same house as her elder daughter. Of the 12 women mentioned above, three were visiting home and the others had returned in the past two years. One respondent had worked as a migrant domestic worker and had subsequently, along with her husband, also managed a recruitment agency in Bahrain until 2017.

In addition, an advocate in an East Godavari town shared his experience of pursuing complaints received from the family members of women who had gone missing or had difficulties with employers in the Middle East. The intervention of a group of lawyers, of which he was a member, had enabled a number of women to return home and to file cases against defaulting sponsors and/or intermediaries.

3. Who migrates: Understanding women's migration from the source regions

Women's emigration for domestic work has, in general terms, been understood as a response to push and pull factors. Push factors comprised primarily economic distress, social pressure to pay for marriages within the family, people's hopes for a better life and livelihood issues arising from climate change. Relatively higher wages in the destination countries and demand for workers in the Middle East served as pull factors.[38] The vast majority of the women who participated in the sample survey underlined the inadequacies in their circumstances at home as having prompted them to migrate, and also said that overseas jobs were attractive because they offered higher salaries.

The push-and-pull dimensions were often inseparable and important in the respondent women's own views. To understand the significance of push and pull factors, they must be placed in the broader context created by an adverse state policy, which influences not only the scale of migration and the forms that it takes but also the decision-making process at the household level, which is embedded in family and community patriarchies.[39] Further, compared to push and pull factors that are more generic, the specificities of the connections between the source regions and the destinations may offer better explanations for spatial clustering of women emigrants and sustained migration from the specific source regions.

In the first part of this section, the connections that have been forged between the sending regions and the Middle East are examined to understand how they may have spurred the migration of women as domestic workers. This is followed by an analysis of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of MWDWs to understand who the women who migrate as domestic workers are and the meanings that migration held for them. Finally, the decision-making regarding women's migration within households and communities are probed to engage with women's aspirations and to understand how gender, caste and class influence the decision making process.

3.1 The ties that bind

The spatial clustering of migrants and gender-differentiated patterns of migration persist even after 50 years of migration, and so they assume a special importance in explaining south Indian women's mobility to the Middle East. Spatial clustering draws attention to the repressive effects of policy, in confining recruitment largely to source areas that are already connected to the destination countries through a stock of networks and personal connections. It is also important to note that migration from these source regions continued even in the face of a restrictive policy regime and at least some of this migration was undertaken clearly in defiance of that regime.

To understand post-independence mobility to the Middle East in a broader perspective, scholars have turned to the economic and cultural ties forged over centuries with the Persian Gulf and beyond by merchants from the western coast of India. These connections were overlaid by British colonial influence progressively since the nineteenth century.[40]

38 These issues find mention in a methodologically diverse set of recent studies that include ethnographic accounts (Pattadath, 2010), survey-based analysis (Rajan and Sukendran, 2010; ILO, 2015), analysis of emigration clearance data (Ponturu, 2016) and analytical reviews of migration (Mishra, 2016; Zacaria 2017; Sharma, 2011; Kodoth and Varghese, 2012).

39 The framework proposed by Oishi (2005) recognizes the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that impact decision-making.

40 Drawing from archival sources, Goswami (2011) provides a rich historical account of the links between traders on the west coast of India and Oman. Subrahmanyam (1995: 770) refers to a considerable presence of Mappilla traders from Malabar, who were observed by English and Dutch squadrons in the ports of the Red Sea in the early seventeenth century. For scholarship that has contextualized post-independence labour migration of women to the Gulf in terms of these pre-existing connections see, Wiener (1982) and Pattadath and Moors (2012).

Long-distance labour mobility in the colonial period included indentured migration as well as "free" labour mobility to British dominions such as Burma, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Malaya (Malaysia and Singapore). The latter type of mobility familiarized people with the benefits of migrant livelihoods and enabled them to build networks that were useful subsequently when opportunities opened up in the Middle East, thus laying the foundations for post-independence labour migration. But what were the specific ways in which these connections and attitudes paved the way for the mobility of women to the Middle East as domestic workers?

The migration of domestic workers from Kerala and AP was initiated several decades before the economic boom in the Middle East in the 1970s. For the people of the Godavari region in north coastal AP (referred to as north coastal Andhra), labour migration to the Middle East opened up at a critical historical juncture that coincided broadly with the return of workers from Burma (at present Myanmar) between the late 1940s and late 1960s, corresponding to the time of the Second World War and the closure of Burma.[41] The north coastal Andhra region was a major catchment area of labour for Burma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[42] Large-scale and brisk mobility to Burma included women, especially from the oppressed castes, and demonstrated the benefits of migration for employment – the wage rates were higher and it was possible to save relatively large amounts of money.

Some of the respondents who had migrated to Kuwait in the early 1970s, recalled that members of their families had returned from Burma in the preceding decades. Some of the families that had experienced upward mobility through labour migration to Burma ran into debt subsequently and this was cited as the reason for women to migrate as domestic workers to the Gulf. [43] The return of large numbers of migrant labour from Burma in the late 1940s and then in the late 1960s created a glut on the labour market in the north coastal Andhra region. Jobs in the Middle East and elsewhere (for instance, respondents also referred to migration to the Andaman Islands) created potential outlets for this labour.

Respondents from the coastal areas of Trivandrum recalled migration to South-East Asia and to Ceylon during British rule. They retold success stories of family members who had migrated first to Singapore and from there to London and recalled irregular migration to the Middle East by men on fishing boats. Men who journeyed on fishing boats would jump off at a safe distance from the Persian Gulf and swim ashore.[44] Taking advantage of the connectivity in the early twentieth century, recruiters had mobilized women from the coastal region of Travancore for jobs in Ceylon. Beatrice, who had migrated to Kuwait in 1969, recalled, for instance, that two of her maternal aunts had been recruited for work in Ceylon, and the family had subsequently lost contact with them.[45] After independence, the direction of migration had changed from being predominantly to South-East Asian destinations to the Middle East.

41 Myanmar continues to be referred to as Burma or as Rangoon in the Konaseema region, where people still have vivid memories of this phase of labour migration.

42 The bulk of Telugu workers in colonial Burma were drawn from the north coastal Andhra districts of Gangam, Vizagapatam and Godavari. In 1921, nine south Indian districts alone supplied 50 per cent of all immigrants to Burma and nearly 70 per cent of recruits from the Madras Presidency were Telugus. In 1931, Telugus comprised 25 per cent of the total Indian population of 522,000 in Burma (Burma Census Reports, 1921 and 1931 cited in Satyanarayana, 2002: 94-95, 2014: 179; Chakravarti, 24). The significance of the opportunities in Burma for north coastal Andhra may be gauged from the fact that approximately 3 per cent each of the populations of Vizagapatam and Godavari districts and 5 per cent of the population of Ganjam worked in Burma (Burma Census Report, 1921 in Satyanarayana, 2002: 95).

43 Interviews with women migrants and their family members in East Godavari, 2013. During casual conversations, respondents also referred to labour migration to the Andaman Islands. In an instance that is indicative of well-traversed routes, the polygamous husband of two sisters, both emigrants, had migrated to Kuwait after working first in Bombay (as a teenager) and later in the Andaman Islands, where his father was also employed at the time. This Dalit respondent had worked in Kuwait for about 30 years before returning home to East Godavari. He migrated to Kuwait in the footsteps of his wives, who had taken up employment as domestic workers there in the early 1980s. (Interviews with this man and both his wives in East Godavari, July 2019).

44 Kurien (2002) also documents irregular migration to the Middle East from a village near Trivandrum.

45 Interview with Beatrice and her daughter, Trivandrum, 2016.

A crucial set of connections between the source and destination regions must be sought in Bombay,[46] which from the 1930s, was the nodal point for the recruitment of a category of semi-skilled labour from India for British oil installations in the Middle East.[47] The migration route to the Middle East traversed Bombay as job aspirants travelled to that city to complete the formalities necessary for emigration and to embark on their journeys. Until the 1970s, women travelled by ship. Two distinct forms of ties with Bombay were critical in defining the flow of women as domestic workers from the sending regions of AP and Kerala. They were ties built by traders from the source regions with Arab businessmen who visited Bombay and ties that evolved from previous employment or more broadly livelihood-related migrations to Bombay by people from the source regions.

Traders from the Malabar and Kadapa regions had long-standing ties with Arab merchants and other wealthy Arabs who visited Bombay to do business and/or arrived in search of wives.[48] While people in the recruiting business in Kadapa recalled these ties, the relationships that people in Kadapa and Malabar had with the visiting Arabs underscored the interweaving of marriage and trade links.[49] It was not a big leap from these relationships to the supply of domestic workers when demand for them opened up in the wake of modernization efforts in the Gulf region in the mid-twentieth century. For instance, a woman from Malappuram who was hired by an Arab religious man in the early 1980s said her sponsor had gone to Kozhikode in search of potential candidates and had interviewed her there.[50]

Traders from Malabar and Kadapa had acquired an early foothold in the recruitment trade in Bombay. They reached out to the source regions in Kerala and AP through sub-agents and built a steady supply chain to the Middle East. Even in the early 1980s, Malayali women were recruited by some well-known, licensed recruitment agencies operated by people from Kerala with the headquarters in Bombay.[51] The first traders who metamorphosed into recruitment agents seem to have been Muslim, but by the early 1970s, an assortment of people from the source regions had become a part of the growing recruitment trade in Bombay.[52]

Some of the women who migrated from East Godavari in the early 1970s referred to a "big agent" from Kadapa, a man called Syed Moosa, who was based in Bombay and who had arranged their visas and travel. Presumably, a flourishing recruitment agent in Bombay at the time, Moosa mobilized candidates for overseas jobs from the East Godavari district through local intermediaries or sub-agents with whom he had developed ties. There were other connections as well. For instance, a domestic worker from East Godavari who migrated in the early 1980s recalled that her paternal uncle operated a recruitment agency in Bombay and that he was instrumental in getting her mother a job with a royal family in Dubai in 1970. Recruiters or people employed by them mobilized aspirants and organized their visits to Bombay, often in groups, and accompanied aspirants even when male family members were present.[53]

Women who migrated for the first time in the early 1980s had vivid memories of how they were presented to potential Arab sponsors at the office of a recruitment agency or in a hotel in Bombay. In some instances, their sponsors had asked them questions before selecting them.[54] By this time, some of the big recruitment agencies headquartered in Bombay had offices

46 Bombay is now Mumbai but is consistently referred to as Bombay because this report deals with migration that preceded the change in nomenclature and also because the respondent migrant women continued to refer to the city as Bombay.

47 The early oil installations of British and American influence in the Middle East drew upon migrant workers of several nationalities. Indians were mostly semi-skilled workers or workers with intermediate-level skills, see Errichiello (2012: 399).

48 British records document the circulation of Muslims, including Arabs, as key suppliers of goods and military services throughout the Deccan (Mallampalli, 2009: 190-91). The colonial administration associated the significant presence of Muslims in Rayachoty with its location on the military and trade route between Hyderabad and the south of India (Mallampalli, 2009; Brackenbury, 2000).

49 Interviews with travel agents, 2013.

50 Interview in Malappuram in 2013.

51 In Malabar, the Arabis, a sub-group of Mappilla Muslims, trace their descent to Arab traders who developed kinship ties on the Malabar Coast as traders in the pre-colonial period (McGilvary, 1998).

52 Discussion with travel agents in Kadapa in 2013 and interviews with women who had migrated in the early 1970s.

53 Interviews with women in Trivandrum and East Godavari in 2013 and from highland villages in Kollam and Malappuram in 2019.

54 Interviews with Srirani in East Godavari, 2013, Fouzia in Kollam, 2019 and with travel agents in Kadapa, 2013.

in Kerala's cities and at least one of them had an office in a Kadapa town.[55]

Migrants from the coastal region of Trivandrum and from East Godavari had established themselves in Bombay, working in a diverse set of trades ranging from regular jobs in a variety of establishments, including the government, to occupations in the informal sector. For instance, Beatrice's sister made a living in Bombay from the sale of arrack. Beatrice migrated to Kuwait in the late 1960s. Prior to that, when the inter-state movement of rice had been banned due to shortages, she had sourced a specific variety of red rice from the mills in south Travancore and transported it to Bombay for sale to Malayali families there.[56]

By the mid twentieth century, entrepreneurs from Razole in East Godavari had set up small pen manufacturing units in Bombay that proved to be a source of employment for a sizeable number of young people from the region. Owners of these units are remembered to have mobilized large numbers of children from the villages in this region to work in these units, providing an important channel of mobility to Bombay.

Migrant workers in Bombay provided succour to aspiring emigrants to the Middle East. They relayed information and provided logistical support when aspiring emigrants arrived in the city seeking to obtain visas and to mobilize other necessary documents. Even when visas were obtained through personal connections in the destination country, as was the case with most of the migrant women from Trivandrum who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s, the assistance of intermediaries was unavoidable in order to process papers in Bombay and to make travel arrangements. Previous employment-related migration from the source regions in Bombay served as a bridge as they facilitated these services.

The early cohort of emigrants from East Godavari had their passports made in Bombay. "During that time, passports were not made in Hyderabad. They used to be made only in Bombay. For the passport, we used to go to Bombay for 10 or 15 days. We used to apply for the passport, and come back; then they would inform us about the next step".[57] The passport of a woman from East Godavari, who sailed to Kuwait in 1971, showed a residence address in Bombay.[58] As migration became increasingly popular, an array of services developed around it. For instance, the father of a woman who migrated in 1980 became a passport agent, taking applications from East Godavari to Bombay and delivering passports to applicants when they were ready.

Women who migrated in the early 1970s made multiple preparatory visits to Bombay. In later years, it became more common for women to wait in the city, sometimes for several months at a time, until they received their visas and were fully equipped to embark on their journeys.[59] Recruitment agents arranged accommodation in places that seem to have mushroomed specifically for that purpose in parts of Bombay. Even so, support from kin and acquaintances in Bombay was a blessing because it helped migrant women get information and raise finances and made them less vulnerable to exploitation by brokers. However, with the expansion of migration since the 1980s and the increase in the numbers of migrants, the dependence on intermediaries grew manifold as many aspirants lacked personal connections in Bombay.

A striking feature of the migration of women domestic workers from East Godavari is the prominence of people from the SCs, who may

55 Women respondents named these agencies. Interviews in Kadapa and Trivandrum, 2013 and 2019.

56 Beatrice also revealed that her sister, who lived in Bombay, had arranged the marriage of one of her [the sister's] daughters to a Telugu man, who held a lower-level government job in the city, indicating social ties that were fostered between two migrant groups. There were also instances of emigrant men from Kerala in the Middle East who had married or lived with Telugu women emigrants. In one instance, it turned out that a Telugu woman who was reported to be "missing" in Kuwait was actually absconding and believed to be living with a recruiting agent from Kerala.

57 Lakshmi who went to work in Kuwait in 1971.

58 Lakhamma, who was interviewed in East Godavari in 2013, showed me her first passport which showed her as a resident of Bombay.

59 Interviews with workers in East Godavari in 2013 and in Kerala in 2013 and 2019.

well be the biggest beneficiaries of migration from this region to the Middle East.[60] Women who had migrated in the early 1970s who were interviewed for this survey were all from SC families. In this respect, migration from East Godavari and Kerala could not be more different. The SCs have had the least access to post-independence international migration from Kerala. The East Godavari example suggests that the reason for the lack of access to mobility for SCs in Kerala is not so much the lack of financial resources but the dearth of social networks and personal connections, whether in Bombay or the Middle East. An important factor in explaining the access that SC men and women from the Godavari region had to migration to the Middle East is their prior familiarity with migrant livelihoods. The SCs had participated sufficiently in the previous labour migration to Burma and Bombay to develop the connections and networks that were crucial to gain access to migration but also had through this process, acquired a disposition favourable to migration.

Journeys to Burma and Bombay were interwoven in the narratives of some of the migrant women who travelled to the Middle East in the 1970s. The fathers-in-law of two SC women, Sujatha (cited in chapter 2), and Kalavati, who emigrated to Kuwait in the early 1970s, had worked in Burma as had Kalavati's husband. It is also of import that Kalavati's brother-in-law had set up a pen manufacturing unit in Bombay, suggesting that some of the savings from Burma may have flowed into Bombay.[61] Migration to Bombay also served as a stepping stone to the Middle East. Gopal, for instance, who was recruited to work in a pen manufacturing unit when he was only a child, made his way from Bombay to Dubai in 1977, when he was only a 16-year-old. After a few years, he moved to Kuwait, where he set up his own business as a migration broker.[62]

Women who migrated from East Godavari in the 1970s had obtained visas through recruitment agencies, but they spoke of how they had subsequently arranged visas for men and women of their acquaintance, often in response to the demand from their employers' relatives and friends in the Middle East. Some of them had also found jobs for their husbands. Once a migration route was established, direct connections between people in the source regions and those employed in the Middle East spurred interest and quickened the process. Louise, who went to work for a Malayali family in Kuwait in 1955 and is remembered as having initiated migration from Kochu Kuwait, found a job for her son in Kuwait in the 1960s.[63] It was her son who had arranged visas for several of their relatives including some of the early cohort of MWDWs from this village. As information spread about migration, women from the coastal villages began to aspire to overseas employment and sourced visas from recruiters in Bombay and from individual suppliers in Trivandrum city.[64]

There were also other sources of demand for women domestic workers. There was a growing number of educated Indian workers in the Middle East, which included young women professionals, primarily nurses from Kerala. The migration of nurses, who were, with very few exceptions, women from Kerala, began sometime in the 1940s and gained momentum thereafter.[65] As young women with long working

60 Satyanarayana (2011) refers to Dalit landlords in Sakhinettipalli (a mandal in Razole in East Godavari), who had gained their wealth by working in the Middle East. During my sojourn in East Godavari, people told and retold stories of individual wealth gained by migrants who had worked as domestic workers. A personal friend from the area spoke of how his deceased maternal aunt had been able to purchase about 20 acres of land in East Godavari by working in Kuwait as a domestic worker since the early 1980s. In some of these instances, the women had continued to work in the Middle East and had also found jobs for their children in the same destination even as they invested in land and homes in their home villages, which were maintained by relatively poorer relatives. It was also apparent that migrants had purchased land from privileged caste (Kapu) landowners whose fortunes were in decline, and who had not been open to the migration of women as domestic workers and looked down on it.

61 Interviews with Kalavati's husband and daughter in East Godavari, 2013, and with Sujatha, East Godavari, 2013.

62 Interview with Gopal and his wife, East Godavari, September 2013.

63 Interviews with Louise's daughter, daughter-in-law and Louise's sister's two daughters, all return migrants, in February 2016. Louise was employed to take care of a child by the local parish priest's sister's family, who was herself employed in Kuwait. Louise's husband was the caretaker of the church and therefore was closely acquainted with the parish priest. Louise had not worked outside the home prior to migration.

64 Interviews with the early cohort of women migrants from Kochu Kuwait, January–February 2016.

65 Young women from Kerala had begun to leave their homes to study nursing in various parts of India by the 1930s. A large number of them found their way to nursing schools and colleges in Bombay and New Delhi and were recruited for service even as the

hours, nurses needed assistance with childcare. The Kuwait Oil Company, which employed a large number of semi-skilled and professionally qualified Indian workers, mediated the demand for childcare workers through a facility to employ *ayahs* from India for a wage.[66]

3.2 Profile of migrant women

Women migrants are drawn disproportionately from the historically oppressed social groups – the OBCs and SCs.[67] It was rare to find women from the privileged castes who had migrated as domestic workers and for this reason, the researchers made a special effort to locate them in all the fieldwork sites. The composition of the sample that was surveyed in terms of social and religious groups underlines the significance of the older connections forged with the Middle East and a demonstration effect within and across social groups. Scheduled caste and OBC women dominate the sample, underlining the social marginalisation of MWDWs within their sending societies, a feature that is also reflected in different ways in their social and demographic characteristics in both Kerala and AP. As discussed in Section 3.1 above, however, their caste/religious backgrounds also signalled migrant women's access to social networks and personal connections.

In order to analyze the composition of women migrants, two kinds of comparisons were useful. First, the characteristics of the sample women from AP were compared to those of women from Kerala and second, the characteristics of women migrants from each state were compared with the overall characteristics of women from the respective states. Such a comparison allows us to position women migrants within their own origin states and provides scope for insights into the relationship between women's migration and the specific development trajectories of each state.

Though women migrants are mostly drawn from the socially disadvantaged groups, there were sharp distinctions in the composition of the sample from the two states. The sample from AP was overwhelmingly Hindu with about half of the migrants being from SC families and the remaining mostly from OBC families. The sample from Kerala was overwhelmingly from OBC families with about half the migrants being Muslim, followed in near-equal proportions by Christians and Hindus. Four-fifths of the sample from Kerala was OBC, comprising Christian, Muslim and Hindu migrants. The SC and scheduled tribes (ST) women made up only about 10 per cent of the sample from Kerala. An important distinction between the two states in terms of composition of the sample is the more even distribution of migrants from SC and OBC families in AP compared to the concentration of women from the OBC category in Kerala. This is suggestive of the limited access that SC women from Kerala have had to migration as against the disproportionately large participation of SC women in the migration for domestic work from AP.

Source-wise distinctions within the states also were important. As Table 3.1 shows, two-thirds of the sample of migrants from East Godavari was from SC families and the remaining was mostly from OBC families. There was a small number of Christians, Muslims, Kapu (a privileged caste) and ST women.[68] The taluk in Kadapa selected for the fieldwork had a relatively large presence of Muslims, and there was a general impression that Muslim women dominated migration flows from this area owing to the close cultural ties forged through marriages between Arab men and local women. However, only one-third of the sample from this taluk was Muslim. It is possible that there is some underestimation of Muslims in the sample from Kadapa. As a result of the effort by the research team to capture the ethnic and religious diversity of migrants, it is possible that the sample included a higher number of Hindus from the diverse caste groups in the

health infrastructure was being set up in the Middle East. For references to the beginnings of this migration, see Healey (2014) and Kodoth (2016).

66 The term "ayah" gained currency during the colonial period and referred to Indian women who were hired to take care of European children. The wife of a deceased KOC employee said her husband had started working as a camp officer with the company in 1947 and had worked his way up to a good position in the labour office. When she had her last child in 1964, she employed a Tamil-speaking ayah through the facility provided by KOC. Conversation, Trivandrum, December 2018.

67 The OBCs, unlike the SCs, are not defined in the Constitution but are disadvantaged social groups that were identified for affirmative action on the basis of recommendations made by the Backward Classes Commission established in 1953.

68 The OBC women were from service castes such as Setti Balija, Devanga, inland fishers and several others. There were four Christians, one Muslim, two Kapu and two ST women.

TABLE 3.1. RELIGION AND CASTE OF WOMEN MIGRANTS FROM KERALA AND AP (IN PERCENTAGES)

Characteristics	Categories	Kerala	A P
Religion	Hindu	25.49 (52)	88.25 (263)
	Christian	27.45 (56)	01.34 (04)
	Muslim	47.06 (96)	10.4 (31)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Caste	SC	09.3 (19)	46.0 (137)
	ST	01.5 (03)	04.0 (12)
	OBC	82.4 (168)	45.7 (136)
	Others	06.9 (14)	04.4 (13)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**

Source: Sample survey of MWDWs in AP and Kerala.
*Numbers of women are in parenthesis.

region. But researchers did not have difficulty in locating SC, ST and OBC Hindus in Kadapa, therefore it is possible that there has been a widening of the social base of migration through a demonstration effect among Hindu OBCs and other castes.[69]

The sample from Trivandrum was mixed with Hindus, Muslims and Christians (mostly Latin Catholics) in near equal proportions, but migrants continue to be drawn from specific geographical areas – the coastal region, highland areas and urban slums.[70] Barring two SC women and one privileged caste woman from the highland region, the sample from Malappuram (92 per cent) was entirely Muslim. The Muslims, Christians and most of the Hindu migrants from Kerala belong to OBC families. The SC and ST women in the highland areas of Trivandrum and in the slums had been recruited in small numbers since the 1990s, but they were more actively sought out by brokers in the past two decades. An ST respondent, who migrated to Kuwait in 2010, said recruiters did not evince interest in recruiting ST women earlier, perceiving them to be less creditworthy, but this was changing as brokers now advance money to recruits, aware that they can extract money from them or from their employers at the destination.

In Kerala, the few privileged caste women in the sample were dispersed mostly in Trivandrum city and had accessed overseas employment through either their personal connections with middle-class employers overseas or through local brokers. In AP, these women resided in villages and towns in the source areas in proximity with other migrant women and accessed migration through information and locally available networks.[71] Privileged caste women had sought migrant jobs owing to adverse household circumstances (wayward or unwell husbands, mounting debt and an inability to provide for the family and educate children), and they underlined the difficulties they or their families had faced on account of their migration because of adverse caste norms. Only in one instance, a Reddy woman from a village in Kadapa, said her husband had encouraged her to go and see the world for herself after he had returned from the Gulf.

There were sharp differences in the age profile of women migrants from the two states, as can been seen in Table 3.2. Women from AP were markedly younger than their counterparts from Kerala, which could indicate greater aspiration and buoyancy in women's migration from AP. Half the women from AP were below 40 years of

69 Other castes comprised six SC, ten ST and 11 Reddy (privileged caste) women. The ST women were mostly Sugali (linked to the Roma), who were once itinerant traders but had settled down as cultivators. A large number of them were from exclusive Sugali villages and had migrated mostly to Kuwait.

70 Latin Catholic is a term used to designate the coastal Christians who are converts of Catholic missionaries from Europe and are differentiated from the Syrian Christians (Roman Catholic and other denominations), who trace their roots to before the Europeans arrived in Kerala, as well as from missionary converts in the midlands and elsewhere in Kerala.

71 They were Kapu in East Godavari, Reddy in Kadapa and Nair in Kerala.

TABLE 3.2. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN MIGRANTS FROM KERALA AND AP (IN PERCENTAGES)

Characteristics	Categories	Kerala	A P
Age of migrants at the time of survey in 2013	Less than 30 years	03.4 (07)	15.4 (46)
	30–39 years	18.6 (38)	35.2 (105)
	40–49 years	45.1 (92)	39.2 (117)
	50–59 years	28.9 (59)	08.7 (26)
	Over 60 years	03.9 (08)	01.3 (04)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Age at the time of first journey / job	Less than 30 years	49.01 (100)	55.04 (164)
	30–39 years	38.7 (79)	41.27(123)
	40 and above	12.9 (25)	3.6 (11)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Age at first migration of women who took up their first overseas job since 2000	Below 30 years	29.59 (29)	48.80 (102)
	Below 18 years	2.56 (2)	3.82 (8)
Marital status	Never married	3.92 (08)	3.36 (10)
	Currently married	50.98 (104)	78.18 (228)
	Divorced/separated	23.53 (48)	5.36 (16)
	Widowed	21.56 (44)	13.09 (39)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Marital status at first migration	Never married	11.00 (22)	6.71 (20)
	Currently married	52.94 (108)	86.58 (258)
	Divorced/separated	23.53 (49)	3.02 (09)
	Widowed	12.25 (25)	3.68 (11)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**

Source: Sample survey of MWDWs in AP and Kerala, 2013
*Numbers of women are in parenthesis

age compared to only 20 per cent of the women from Kerala, and only 10 per cent of women from AP were over 50 years old as against one-third of women from Kerala. This suggests that migrant women from Kerala may be ageing, which may be on account of two processes: a) the same women may have continued to migrate over two or three decades, and b) women may be comparatively older when they join the migration stream.

Both processes are evident from the sample. As seen in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2, half of the women from Kerala started to migrate before the year 2000 and 12 per cent did so before 1990. In contrast, about 70 per cent of women from AP started to migrate since the year 2000 and only 4 per cent did so before 1990. Table 3.2 substantiates this pattern, showing that women from Kerala started to migrate when they were older compared to women from AP, and that this trend was more pronounced among women who started migrating after the year 2000.

A sizeable section of women migrants had started to migrate before they reached the age of 30, the minimum age mandated by the Indian government for women migrants in the ECR category. At the time of the sample survey in 2013, about 15 per cent of the women from AP and 7 per cent of the women from Kerala were less than 30 years old, including one woman each from Kerala and AP, who were less than 18. Because women had started migrating at different points in time over the past 50 years, to have a better understanding of the extent to which the age regulation is flouted, we must examine the age of migrants at the time of their first journeys. Nearly half the women from Kerala and over half of the women from AP were less than 30 years old when they first migrated and a small but nevertheless significant proportion (2.5

per cent from Kerala and 4.4 per cent from AP) were less than 18 years old at the time of their first journey.

Restrictions on women migrants in the ECR category have been reinforced as well as enforced with greater vigour since the year 2000. It is instructive, therefore, that among the women who undertook their first journey after the year 2000, nearly half of them from AP and 30 per cent of them from Kerala were under 30 years of age. Thus, a substantial proportion of women migrants from both states had infringed the minimum age stipulation of the government even after the regulations were intensified.

While there was a decline in women below the age of 30 years migrating from both states over the period captured within the sample, the decline has been greater in Kerala than in AP. As already pointed out, the significant decline in younger women going from Kerala has contributed to the ageing of migrants from the state, whereas the sustained mobility of young women from AP underlined the buoyancy of migration from the state. The reasons for the difference in the age pattern of women's migration between the two states, however, may be more due to cultural factors than to legal interventions. The following discussion of the marital status of migrant women and changes therein over women's migration trajectory provides some clues to these cultural factors and to differences in the meanings of women's migration in the two states.

Over three-quarters of migrant women from AP were married, whether at the time of the survey or at the time of their first overseas journey, compared to only about half of the women from Kerala (Table 3.2). The difference is even more striking when we look at the proportion of women who were widowed, divorced or separated at the time of their first overseas journey. Only about 7 per cent of migrant women from AP were in this category compared to 36 per cent of migrant women from Kerala. Over time, however, women in the currently married and never married categories decreased in both states, whereas the proportion of widows increased as women moved from one category to another. The gap between the two states was smaller when the proportion of women who were widows, separated or divorced at the time of the survey was compared because of the net effect of widowhood, divorce or separation and remarriage after women commenced their overseas careers.

The disproportionate presence of divorced and separated women as well as widows among the sample of women migrants from Kerala merits deeper analysis. With their marriages having broken down in one way or another, women in these categories fall outside the idealized frameworks of marital protection and provisioning and are likely to be vulnerable unless they are provided for outside the framework of marriage. Women's vulnerability is made worse when they lack labour market experience and because they receive lower wages than men.

As gender norms intersect with caste norms to render the framework of marital protection and provisioning less binding on women from historically-oppressed social groups, it is expected that marital breakdown would be a less disruptive experience, in social and economic terms, for women from these social groups compared to women from the privileged castes, who are likely to be more dependent on their spouses for material provisioning. In this context, a possible explanation for the disproportionate presence of widows, separated and divorced women among migrant women from Kerala is that the male-breadwinner norm has become progressively more binding among the historically-oppressed castes in the state.

The male-breadwinner norm gained widespread acceptance in Kerala through processes that were part of the state's distinctive history of the expansion of human development. Political struggle and social reform paved the way for upward social mobility, which was expressed in gendered terms by enshrining the male-breadwinner and dependent female-housewife at the core of families.[72] The idealization of the male-breadwinner raised barriers against the

72 Community and/or caste-based social reform, agrarian struggle, education and working-class mobilization contributed to a process of gendering based on the ideals of the male breadwinner and women as dependent housewives. There is considerable scholarship that engages critically with the processes that ushered in a new reformist patriarchy in Kerala. For a sample of this work, see Devika (2005), and Kodoth and Eapen (2005). With reference to women workers in low-paying occupational groups, Anna Lindberg (2003) refers to a process of effeminization of women workers in the cashew-processing sector in Kerala through a

migration of married women, while making it easier for women to migrate when their marriages had either broken down or otherwise ceased to provide for them and their children. The skewed age pattern and marital-status pattern of women in the sample suggest a distinctive form of social marginalization of migrant women from Kerala. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Unmarried women comprised less than 5 per cent of the sample in both states at the time of the survey, but their share was about double of what it was when they began their migratory careers. Over the years, more than half of the unmarried women had married. As a general case in both states, young, single women's migration is much less acceptable than migration after marriage, and though the circumstances in which unmarried women migrate varied significantly, the variation was not so much between states or source contexts as between individual women. The circumstances in which young, unmarried women migrated ranged from social pressure to earn their own dowries (which their parents were too poor to afford) to the attractions of a good salary.

Wedding expenses and dowries were an important motivation for unmarried women to take up overseas jobs at an early age. As a 17-year-old, Rehana had migrated to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic worker. Three years of her salary went to pay off the family debt and other family expenses, but she saved most of her salary over the two years preceding her return to her village in Kadapa, a month before the interview in October 2013, to buy gold for her own marriage. After her return, Rehana said her parents had started searching for a bridegroom. Arifa, who was from a village in Kadapa, was only 15 years old when she took up a job in Kuwait because she said her parents were too poor to afford to get her married. Eventually, she married a much older man she met in Kuwait.

Two young women from very poor coastal sector families in Trivandrum, who were in their early twenties, had used their own earnings from overseas jobs to finance their weddings. Women who migrated as young girls sometimes remained unmarried. Treesa who is from a poor coastal family in Trivandrum, said her father sent her to work in Singapore for the family of a relative and that subsequently she had shifted to a job in Bahrain. She had helped pay for the weddings of her four younger sisters and continued to support their families.[73]

Women's occupational profile prior to migration underlined the compulsion on them to work for a livelihood and the attractions of overseas jobs. While 77 per cent of the women from AP were employed prior to migration as against 66 per cent of the women from Kerala, women were employed overwhelmingly in daily wage labour or forms of self-employment that were premised on little or no education (Table 3.3). Caste and gender norms structure women's employment and depress women's participation in poorly paid forms of work, especially among the socially

TABLE 3.3. EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND OCCUPATION OF WOMEN MIGRANTS FROM KERALA AND AP PRIOR TO MIGRATION (IN PERCENTAGES)

Characteristics	Categories	Kerala	A P
Employed prior to migration		66.67 (136)	77.5 (231)
Occupation prior to migration	Wage labour in agriculture	0.0 (0)	87.0 (201)
	Wage labour in non-agriculture / fish vending	53.67 (73)	3.89 (11)
	Paid domestic work	22.98 (30)	2.59 (6)
	Others	24.26 (33)	5.63 (13)
	Total	**100 (136)**	**100 (231)**

Source: Sample survey of MWDWs in AP and Kerala, 2013

combination of gendered workplace practices and political organization. The ideal of marital provisioning was enabled greatly through large-scale migration of men to the Middle East and reinforced through a slew of consumption practices that male migration brought in its wake. For a review, see Kodoth (2008).

73 Interviews in Trivandrum, 2013.

privileged groups. Prior to migration, women from AP were employed overwhelmingly in wage labour in agriculture, whereas employment was more differentiated in Kerala with women in fish vending, non-agricultural wage labour, paid domestic work as well as a variety of home-based work.

Prior to their migration, the work participation rates of the women in the sample from each of the two states was very high compared to the work participation rates for all women in AP and Kerala respectively, which underlines the compulsion to work among this segment of women. Overall, for all women in the two states, the work participation rate of women is higher in AP compared to Kerala, and this is also the pattern for the sample women prior to migration. However, there are sharp differences in the employment profile of migrant women within the two states, with respect to the source regions. Women's employment prior to migration was higher in Kadapa (84.3 per cent) than in East Godavari (74.3 per cent) and in Malappuram (70.4 per cent) compared to Trivandrum (65.3 per cent). The higher work participation rates of migrant women from Malappuram and Kadapa correspond to the generally poorer demographic and social profile of women in these districts compared to the districts to which the other source regions belonged (Table 3.6).

The readiness of young Telugu women to migrate is reflected also in the age of migrant women's youngest children when they embarked on their overseas careers. Table 3.4 shows that nearly half of the women from AP had children who were five or less than five years old when they migrated for the first time compared to 35 per cent of women from Kerala. This is important because a higher proportion of migrant women from Kerala were divorced, separated or widowed when they migrated, which indicates that the burden of providing for the family may have fallen on their shoulders. But women from Kerala may not be able to migrate when they have small children as they may find it more difficult than women from AP to make alternative arrangements for childcare, and this may be because of more rigid norms requiring mothers of young children to provide full-time care.

The proportion of women migrants with children below 5 years of age reduces when we examine only those who began migrating after 2000, but the gap between migrant women from Kerala and AP actually widens. Overall, 11 women from AP had children who were less than a year old when they started migrating compared to only two women from Kerala, but there was a notable and steady decline in the numbers of women

TABLE 3.4. AGE OF THE YOUNGEST CHILDREN OF WOMEN MIGRANTS WHEN THEY MIGRATED FOR THE FIRST TIM OVERALL AND FOR MIGRANTS SINCE 2000

Characteristics	Categories	Kerala	A P
Age of youngest child when they started migrating	Up to 5 years	35.22 (62)	47.24 (120)
	6–10 years	19.88 (35)	22.44 (57)
	11–15 years	30.68 (54)	23.22 (59)
	16 years and above	14.20 (25)	07.08 (18)
	Total*	**100 (176)**	**100 (254)**
	Less than one year	1.14 (2)	4.33 (11)
Age of the youngest child of women who started migrating after 2000	Up to 5 years	24.7(21)	39.78 (74)
	6–10 years	15.3 (13)	24.19 (45)
	11–15 years	36.47 (31)	28.49 (53)
	16 years and above	23.53 (20)	7.53 (14)
	Total*	**100 (85)**	**100 (186)**
	Less than one year	0.0 (0)	2.15 (4)

Source: Sample survey of MWDWs in AP and Kerala, 2013
*Totals refers to women who had children when they migrated for the first time

who took up their first overseas jobs when they had infant children.[74]

It was impossible not to miss the sense of urgency there was to tap overseas opportunities among women in the study areas of East Godavari and Kadapa. Child-rearing strategies were honed to accommodate overseas opportunities in these areas. The resources of the extended family were called upon to relieve young mothers to take up overseas jobs. In a village in East Godavari, a man in his late twenties said that his mother, wife and sister-in-law were employed overseas as domestic workers and his sister, who lived in the village, helped take care of his children and his brother's children.[75] Such childcare arrangements were considered so acceptable that families rarely anticipated difficulties.

The reported salaries of overseas domestic workers made it difficult for women to forgo these opportunities. In 2019, for instance, the reported salaries were between 20,000 and 30,000 Indian Rupees (INR) a month. Jyotsana was from a landless SC family in East Godavari, and her eldest daughter and her husband's sister were working for the same household in Dubai. Jyotsana's eldest daughter had two school-going children who had been left in the care of her unmarried sisters and her father. She migrated four years ago when her youngest child was only a year old. Jyotsana was in her village in July 2019 because the second of her four daughters was soon going to give birth. She earned INR25,000 a month, and the burden of providing for the family rested on her shoulders. Her husband was frail, her youngest daughter was yet to be married and her second and third daughters were expecting children. In these circumstances, she anticipated considerable expenses in the near future.

Another migrant, Darshana, had sent her two children, a son and a daughter, to a boarding school in East Godavari in order to avail of a job in Dubai. Her husband and her parents also lived in Dubai. Darshana was forced to return to her marital home in East Godavari in 2017 because her mother-in-law fell critically ill. At the time she was earning 2,500 UAE Dirhams (AED), which was close to INR40,000 in a full-time job with a Malayali family.

In a rare instance, Preethi, a young mother from East Godavari returned home in 2018 after quitting her job in Qatar before completing a year because, she said her children's education began to suffer. She pointed out that her employer was kind to her and had paid for her return ticket. As she was employed in a household that also employed a relative of hers, who had obtained the visa for her, she did not have problems of adjustment and the domestic workers were permitted to cook food for themselves. In Preethi's marital home, her husband's sister was also employed overseas as a domestic worker and her mother-in-law had worked in Qatar for five years many years ago.

When they felt that the situation demanded it, migrant women have left their infant children at home with family members. In 2005, Arifa had returned to Kuwait, leaving a 40-day-old infant in the care of her paternal aunt as her mother and husband were employed in Kuwait. Arifa said she would have lost her emigration status if she had stayed at home any longer, and this would have meant she would have lost the large sum of money that was paid for her visa. She had gone home to her village in Kadapa in the seventh month of her pregnancy.

Nageshwari, who was from the *dhobi* (washerman) caste in Kadapa, was in an advanced stage of pregnancy and had returned to her village in mid-2013. Her husband and she were employed by the same household in Kuwait. Nageswari said she wanted to return to work a few months after her delivery and would entrust her child to her mother. In her absence, her employer in Kuwait had employed a part-time worker, and she was keen to ensure that she did not lose her job.

Childbearing also was negotiated by migrant workers in ways that sought to cut down potential losses. Sumathi had returned to her village in East Godavari in early 2019 with her husband after cancelling their visas because they wanted to live together and conceive a child. In Kuwait, Sumathi held a full-time job as a live-in domestic worker in a household. The couple had used part of their savings to buy land and had

74 Five out of 68 women (7.35 per cent) from AP, who started migrating in the 1990s, had children below the age one year as against one out of 71 women from Kerala in this category.

75 Interviewed in 2013.

built a house. Sumathi's family was intensely migratory. In Kuwait, Sumathi had worked in the same household as her husband's paternal aunt, whereas her younger sister worked in Bahrain for a household which also employed their grandmother. Her mother and her younger sister's husband also were employed in Kuwait.

Such juggling of marital lives and childcare with overseas employment seemed much less acceptable in Kerala. Mothers of young children could face intense disapproval if they sought to migrate for work and when they did so, it was not unusual for them to underline circumstances of extreme compulsion. A young mother from Malappuram had left for Dubai in late 2018 to look for work because her husband had returned from Kuwait after falling foul of the law. The man had since had an accident and was unable to work. The woman's mother, a return migrant with about two decades of experience working in several Gulf countries, explained that her daughter's decision to go overseas was propelled by these circumstances. The daughter, who had completed school, and was working as a domestic worker in the household of a relative, was hopeful of finding better work as an ayah in a school.

So far, our analysis shows that migrant women from Kerala are older, more likely to suffer from a breakdown of marital provisioning, less likely to have children under five years of age when they start migrating, and are less likely to have worked prior to marriage than their counterparts from AP. Three distinct features of the social context in Kerala may be implicated in these differences: a) women engaged in wage labour, including migrant domestic work, attract social disapproval and are subject to stigma; b) the progress in women's education in the state, which had raised women's aspirations for better jobs based on higher qualifications; and c) the inordinate emphasis placed on childcare, which itself may be linked to the educational progress made by women in the state.

These features underline the nature of the social progress made by women in Kerala. Migrant women's performance on some of the basic indicators of development allows for a comparison of the relative vulnerability or strength of women from these two sending states. Such a comparison would also enable an understanding of the position of migrant women within their own sending societies by examining their achievements in the context of the overall achievements of women in their respective states.

On two basic indicators of development, age at marriage and education, shown in Table 3.5, women migrants from AP performed significantly worse than women migrants from Kerala. Age at marriage is a critical indicator of the control that women exercise over their lives and has ripple effects on their endowments. Over half of the women migrants from AP were married before they were 18 years old as against 35 per cent of women migrants from Kerala, indicating that women from AP were relatively more vulnerable. Further, a third of women migrants from AP who were less than 30 years old at the time of the survey were married before they were 18 years old compared to only a fraction of women from Kerala (Table 3.5).

Early marriage is closely related to poor education. Not surprisingly, therefore, Table 3.5 shows a yawning gap in literacy between women migrants from AP and Kerala. Nearly half the women from AP were illiterate as against only 12.7 per cent of women from Kerala. Going beyond literacy, however, it is apparent that most of the women migrants from Kerala had not completed secondary school, and that a higher proportion of women from AP had completed Class 10 or higher levels of education than women from Kerala. This reinforces the indications gained from the earlier analysis that overseas domestic work jobs were more sought after by women in AP and that even a section of qualified women were willing to take them.[76] After a stint at domestic work, some of the better qualified women from AP sought jobs as assistants in hospitals, schools and shops. Among the migrants from East Godavari, there was a woman with auxiliary nursing and midwifery (ANM) qualifications and a woman with higher secondary education, both of whom had migrated as part of family strategies to optimize earnings.[77]

76 This is instructive also because women's performance in education in Kerala could give the impression that many women with ECNR passports may be migrating as domestic workers, in which case they would not be captured in the ECR statistics. Nevertheless, migration from Goa and Kerala may be more diverse than from AP as women in the ECR category have more education but also because of richer networks. By contrast, the migration of women from AP by contrast is mostly for domestic work.

77 Interviews in East Godavari, 2013 and 2019.

Their age at marriage and literacy achievements show that women from AP are potentially more vulnerable compared to women from Kerala, but an important nuance becomes visible when we compare the performance of migrant women from our sample with all women in their respective states using Census data (Table 3.5). The profile of women migrants from AP in the sample is closer to the general profile of women in AP in terms of age at marriage and literacy than the profile of women migrants from Kerala is to the general profile of women in Kerala. The proportion of women migrants from Kerala who were married before they were 18 years old was twice that of all women in the state, whereas the gap was much less for women from AP. In terms of literacy too, the average achievement of migrant women from Kerala was significantly poorer than the average achievement of all women in the state, indicating migrants may be drawn from disadvantaged sections of women. By contrast, the achievements of migrant women from AP in terms of literacy were more similar to that of all women in AP.

This analysis reveals that though women from Kerala performed considerably better than women from AP on these basic indicators of development, they were comparatively more marginal within their own sending society than women from AP. The comparative profile of the marital status of women migrants from the two states, also provided in Table 3.5, reinforces the view that migrant women from Kerala are drawn from more marginalized sections of their own society than were their AP counterparts.

This understanding of the position of women migrants between and within states substantiates the inference of greater buoyancy and dynamism in the migration of women from AP, which was evident also from the ECR statistics and from the demographic profile of the sample women. That migrant women from Kerala are more marginal within Kerala than migrant women from AP are within AP could be at least partially an effect of stigma, which is likely to depress migration and narrow the social profile of migrant women.

Within Kerala and AP, women migrants from Malappuram and Kadapa respectively emerged as more vulnerable and marginal compared to women from Trivandrum and East Godavari.

TABLE 3.5. AGE AT MARRIAGE, EDUCATION AND MARITAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN AP AND KERALA

Indicator	Category	Sample survey, 2013		Census of India, 2011*	
		Kerala	AP	Kerala	AP
Age at marriage for women migrants	Less than 18 years	35.10 (66)	55.21 (159)	17.63	41.08
	18–21 years	42.02 (79)	35.41 (102)	43.26	42.52
	More than 21 years	22.87 (43)	09.3 (27)	35.9	9.92
	Total	**100 (188)**	**100 (288)**	**100**	**100**
Age at marriage in women under 30 years	Less than 18 years	16.7 (01)	31.6 (12)		
	18–22 years	33.3 (02)	55.21(21)		
	Over 23 years	50.0 (03)	13.1 (05)		
	Total	**100 (05)**	**100 (38)**		
Education of women migrants	Illiterate	12.7 (26)	46.3 (138)	4.70	41.69
	Up to 9 years of schooling	80.9 (165)	43.0 (128)	42.0	28.40
	Completed 10 years of schooling	06.4 (10)	10.7 (24)	53.3	29.91
	Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**
Marital status	Never married	3.92 (08)	3.36 (10)	18.80	17.59
	Currently married	50.98 (104)	78.18 (228)	73.45	74.10
	Widow	21.56 (44)	13.09 (39)	6.03	7.06
	Separated/divorced	23.53 (48)	5.36 (16)	1.72	1.25
	Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Source: Census of India, 2011, and sample survey, 2013
*Census of India figures refer to women between 15 and 59 years

TABLE 3.6. AGE AT MARRIAGE, EDUCATION AND MARITAL STATUS OF ALL WOMEN IN SOURCE DISTRICTS AND MIGRANT WOMEN IN SAMPLE

	Malappuram		Trivandrum		East Godavari		Kadapa	
	Survey	Census	Survey	Census	Survey	Census	Survey	Census
Age at marriage	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Less than 18	50	38.50	29.4	9.68	50	43.93	66	29.55
18–21years	32.7	45.39	45.6	44.34	38.6	43.78	28.7	54.53
Above 21 years	17.3	13.04	25	42.07	11.3	9.01	5.32	11.34
Education								
Illiterate	18.5	4.83	11.0	5.51	32.2	31.64	76.1	43.87
Up to Class 9	77.8	52.0	81.3	37.20	52	40.70	24.0	28.49
Over Class 10	3.7	43.17	7.3	57.29	15.9	27.66	0.0	27.64
Marital status								
Never married	(1.9)	17.76	5.2	18.43	3.5	17.41	3.1	16.73
Currently married	(31.5)	74.43	58	72.58	78.7	73.41	77.1	75.68
Widow	(24.1)	5.39	20.7	6.76	13.4	7.80	12.5	6.78
Separated/divorced	(42.6)	2.41	16.1	2.24	4.5	1.39	7.3	0.81

Source: Census of India, 2011, and sample survey, 2013

There was a pointer to this in their comparative performance on employment. Table 3.6 shows that women migrants from Kadapa and Malappuram performed poorly in terms of age at marriage and literacy compared to the overall performance of the sample women, and it also shows that the gap was wider between the two sending regions of AP than those in Kerala.

In the light of the above analysis, the achievements of women from Kerala in terms of literacy may resonate more on how they are perceived in the destination countries than in their own home contexts. In this regard, Telugu migrant women's perceptions that their Malayali counterparts in the Middle East had relatively better options at the destination than them were clearly important. When asked whether they had Malayali co-workers while working overseas, several of them said that Malayali women held better jobs or worked "outside", i.e., not as workers who lived with their employers (full-time, live-in workers). A few of the respondents also said that Malayali women were treated better by employers as they were perceived as better educated and they could "speak" better. By contrast, when Telugu respondents said they had Indian co-workers, more often than not they referred to Telugu-speaking women.[78]

The migration of women as domestic workers from AP and Kerala is characterized by sharply distinct trends and patterns that make sense in the larger contexts of gender norms and the developmental profile of women in the two states. A comparative analysis of marital status, age at marriage and educational profile shows that migrant women from Kerala are more disadvantaged within their own sending contexts. Therefore, being young, married or divorced, literate or illiterate, having young children or not were important facets of gendered migration that could implicate significant differences in the meanings for women's migration in AP compared to Kerala. Women in Kerala had a markedly better development profile, but gender norms may be curtailing their entry into overseas domestic work especially when they are young, married and/or have young children. The situation in AP is substantially different as young married women with small children seek out emigrant domestic work with a sense of urgency.

78 Most households had only a single worker, but there were also large households with many workers.

TABLE 3.7. DECISION-MAKING REGARDING WOMEN'S MIGRATION AND SPOUSAL RESPONSE

Decision-making	Categories	Kerala	AP
The main person responsible for the decision	Self	82.84 (169)	37.91 (113)
	Jointly with husband	9.8 (20)	56.02 (167)
	Husband	2.94 (6)	4.36 (13)
	Parents	0.98 (2)	1.67 (5)
	Other relatives	3.43 (7)	0 (0)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Decision-making pertaining to migration by currently married women *	Self	75.92 (82)	31.78 (82)
	Jointly with husband	16.67 (18)	62.40 (161)
	Husband	4.62 (5)	5.04 (13)
	Others	1.77 (3)	0.78 (2)
	Total	**100 (108)**	**100 (258)**
Response of the spouse when the decision was taken by the migrant women alone**	Supported the decision	55.56 (45)	63.42(52)
	Opposed the decision	44.44 (36)	36.58 (30)
	Total	**100 (81)**	**100 (81)**

Source: Sample survey, 2013
*Total refers to currently married women at the time of first migration
**One woman's response is missing from the total

As the decision to migrate is not taken by women in isolation from their families, communities and societies, it is important to consider who is able to migrate from each of these states not only in terms of the circumstances that may compel them to consider migration but in terms of the support they may receive for migration. The institutional dimension is crucial in this respect in defining the support that women may receive for migration. In particular, the institutional dimension could manifest in stigma, which dampens the support that women may receive for their migration aspirations. It is important, therefore, to understand how women may negotiate the social meanings of migration and mobilize legitimacy for their aspirations. To probe these issues further, the nature and processes of decision-making within families regarding women's migration is probed in the following section.

3.3 Decision-making regarding women's migration

The way decisions about women's migration are made within families adds an important layer to the understanding of who gets to migrate overseas among a larger group of women, and who may aspire to go. It assumes a special importance because of the depressing effects of first, the derogatory perceptions women's migration is subject to in the source regions and, second, the restrictions by the Government of India, which also acts as a deterrent. The source regions of women's migration in Kerala and AP also had large-scale male migration; therefore, there was a possibility of conflict within families regarding who should be allowed to avail of their scarce resources to spend on migration.

While most of the women from Kerala said they had taken the decision to migrate by themselves, more than half of the women from AP said they had taken the decision jointly with their spouses. The sample, however, includes women who were unmarried or whose marriages had ceased to exist, for whom the question of joint decision-making with spouses did not arise; therefore the analysis of this question for the sample as a whole could underestimate the extent of joint decision-making by spouses. The analysis of decision-making by currently married women only, seen in Table 3.7, shows that nearly two-thirds of the women from AP made the decision to migrate jointly with their husbands as against less than one-fifth of the women from Kerala. Considered along with the predominance of currently married women in the sample from AP, this response reinforces the indication that women from AP migrate in circumstances that

reflect greater mutuality within their families.[79] The circumstances in which women migrated from Kerala seemed remarkably different. Not only did three-quarters of the currently married women from the state say that they had taken the decision to migrate by themselves, but a higher proportion among them also said that their spouses opposed their decision to go overseas compared to women from AP whose spouses were more supportive. In some instances, women from Kerala had left for their destination countries without informing their husbands, fearing that the husband would create difficulties for them.

The way in which decisions were made corroborates an important distinction in how women's migration was viewed by the families and communities of migrant women in the two source states. Rarely did women migrants migrate along with their spouses. Table 3.8 shows that 14 per cent of the women from Kerala and 12.8 per cent of women from AP reported that their husbands were overseas when they embarked on their first journey abroad. But only a section of these women went to work in the same place as their spouses and lived with them in the destination. Because migration removes women from the regulatory scope of local patriarchy, in the social milieu prevalent in Kerala, migrant women are seen with suspicion for potentially breaching gender and sexual norms.

Interactions with migrant women prior to the survey in 2013 had revealed that multiple factors shaped their decision to go overseas and/or the decision of the family to permit women to migrate. Some of these factors included that visas for male workers were more expensive, or that among people of the same social and economic profile as MWDWs, it was easier to obtain visas for women. In some instances, the women migrated first in order to pave the way for the migration of their spouses or other male family members. Thus, the willingness of families to allow women in preference to men could be on account of some these factors. However, in addition to these reasons, respondents also pointed out that women may also decide to migrate because of personal factors related to abuse by their spouses or refusal to provide for their families.

Table 3.8 shows that the most important factor cited by women from AP for why they (and not their spouse) had migrated was that the visas for women were cheaper than they were for men of the same socio-economic groups. The lower cost of visas along with the relative ease of obtaining them accounted for the responses from over half of the currently-married women from AP. The analysis in the table also shows that personal factors related to the spouses of MWDWs were less important in decision-making in AP than they were in Kerala and supports our previous inference about the greater mutuality in decision-making within families in AP. That women revealed that their spouses lacked confidence or feared going overseas was somewhat surprising in a patriarchal context, but it could also be an indication of how at least a section of women spoke openly about migration.

However, the ease in obtaining visas emerged as the most important factor for women from Kerala. Other factors reported by women were concerned with their spouses and among them the only reason reported by a sizeable section of women was that their spouses had returned from overseas employment and that they were not interested in overseas employment. There is already large-scale male migration from these source states, but what is interesting is that men may cease to migrate and generate space for women to migrate. Personal factors, such as the poor health of spouses and their lack of interest in going overseas, appeared significantly more important in the decision-making of women in Kerala than in AP.

In the source regions, there was no dearth of stories of migrant women who had earned wealth through illicit means, even as allusions to sexually permissive behaviour by migrant women were inescapable in everyday conversations.[80] However, with the exception of the privileged

79 This is not to suggest that there is no discord within families in AP from which women have migrated. On the contrary, women complained that husbands used their earnings in wasteful ways and on illicit pleasures. As a result, some women withheld money from their husbands, but older women especially said if they did not send money, it would only increase discord. There was one instance in Kadapa where a Muslim woman had migrated continuously for over nearly two decades and had remitted all her earnings to her husband who had used it for his second wife and children. She had no savings and was planning to go back to work in the Middle East at the time of the interview.

80 A wider public discourse in the sending contexts in AP sexualized the migration of women for domestic work as was evident in my conversations with people of a different socio-economic profile.

TABLE 3.8 LOCATION OF SPOUSE AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING MIGRATION

Decision-making	Categories	Kerala	AP
Women whose spouses were overseas when they migrated for the first time		14 (15)	12.8 (33)
In the case of women whose spouses were not overseas, why did the woman go and/or why did her spouse choose not to go? *	Received the visa first (ease)	36.96 (34)	14.29 (32)
	Visas for women cost less	5.43 (5)	39.73 (89)
	Spouse was not in good health	11.96 (11)	4.02 (9)
	Spouse lacked confidence	7.61 (7)	12.95 (29)
	Spouse did not care about family	5.43 (5)	1.34 (3)
	Spouse lacked interest in going overseas	22.82 (21)	11.16 (25)
	Spouse had worked overseas previously	22.82 (21)	17.86 (40)
Married women whose spouses were not overseas		100 (92)	100 (224)

Source: Sample survey, 2013
*Where indicated, the numbers in parenthesis do not add up to the total as there were multiple responses

castes, suspicion and shame did not permeate the families and communities of migrant women in the source regions of AP as it did in Kerala. When asked specifically about how the spouses of women migrants were perceived, respondents from migrant families in AP deflected attention to the need for women to work and about their aspirations for a better life for themselves and their children. Men and women saw women's migration as a rational strategy that was adopted to tap the superior earning opportunities for women in the Middle East. They underlined the fact that men of their socio-economic profile could not earn as much through migrant jobs.

Migrant women from Kerala underscored the pain of stigma and were frequently defensive about their migration experience.

> I have heard a lot of gossip about overseas domestic workers. About myself too I have heard ... They ask, "You say you are going for work. We know what kind of work it is. Even without asking, we know that." To put us down [demean us], a kind of behaviour. But we know, that work which is unacceptable to God [sex work], that kind of work, we do not do.[81]

In the sending contexts in Kerala, the migration of a wife constituted an admission of her husband's failure to provide for her and the family, and it also implied loss of sexual control over the wife. Carmel, an older woman from a coastal village in Trivandrum, underlined the pejorative meaning that women's migration held for their husbands. "My daughter-in-law wanted to migrate, but my son would not permit her. He said, 'We do not have to depend on the food she brings home.' My daughter's husband also had said no."[82]

Carmel's daughter-in-law elaborated on what men felt about women's aspirations to go overseas:

> People don't like it that women migrate. Of course, there are men who are no good for the house or for society. They don't care. But there are also men who understand. They know that it [migration of women] could save a family. They give us support. But most of the women from here, they go [overseas] against the wishes of their husbands.[83]

Migrant women recounted how they learnt to aspire to migrate, as well as how they had encountered as well as overcome spousal resistance. For instance, Aruna, who is from Kollam and was interviewed in 2019, pointed out that her husband disapproved of her desire to take up a job abroad as a domestic worker, but her mother-in-law had encouraged her to go. "She had a friend, a Muslim lady who worked overseas ... She [Aruna's mother-in-law] used to tell me, you can do well if you go. You can escape this poverty." Aruna says she "shook his mind"

81 Interview in August 2013, Zareena, a migrant from a highland village in the Trivandrum district that had witnessed women's migration since the early 1980s, spoke about the inimical effects of local gossip.

82 Interview, July 2013

83 Conversation with Anila, Carmel's daughter-in-law, a Kudumbasree worker, in July 2013.

(*manasse elakki*) until her husband relented.[84] "I told him we need to buy land. We have two daughters."

There were rare instances where women informed their spouses only after leaving their homes or when they were certain that they would no longer be prevented from going. Amritha, who is from a coastal village from Trivandrum said her husband suffered from *samshyarogam* (a psychological condition that refers to paranoia regarding a spouse's sexual conduct) and would not have permitted her to go.[85] She first went to her brother's home and from there to the airport, informing her husband only minutes before she boarded the flight to Kuwait.

Suhara, who has been working with a Malayali family in Sharjah since October 2018, left her home in Kollam without informing her husband and his family, fearing that they may stop her or create problems for her.[86] At the time, she was staying with her mother. However, she confided in her two daughters and her son-in-law. Her younger daughter was unmarried, and Suhara's relationship with her husband and his family was already strained because of several loans she had taken from informal creditors for the expenses of her elder daughter's wedding. Before she migrated, she used to earn between INR10,000 and INR15,000 a month cooking for students in a hostel near her home, but this was not enough to repay her loans. In her job in Sharjah, she received INR20,000 a month as her salary.

When it was believed that women were forced by socially compelling circumstances to seek overseas jobs, their migration was viewed sympathetically in the sending contexts in Kerala. The breakdown of marital provisioning was perceived as a compelling circumstance for migration. For example, community workers who helped identify migrant women for inclusion in the sample would express sympathy for some of these women saying that their circumstances had left her with little choice but to migrate. Importantly, as these women were seen as acting out of compulsion, it implied that they were not asserting a positive desire to migrate. A community worker underlined this when she spoke disparagingly of a migrant woman who had continued to work in Kuwait after her adult son also had found employment there, while her disabled husband lived alone in the village. This community worker alluded to the illicit motivations that the migrant women had in continuing to work overseas when there was no compulsion to do so.

Migrant women, in particular, took care to underline the compelling circumstances that forced them to seek overseas jobs. Uma's family lives in a highland village in Kollam district and comprises her mother, sister and two children. There was no male provider in the family – Uma's husband had died, and her sister's husband had refused to support them. Uma left for Oman in late 2018 and was struggling to find regular employment there. Previously, both the sisters had worked in Kerala as post-natal care providers, a full-time, live-in occupation which involved providing care services for a mother and child for 40 days after the child was born. This is an occupation that fetches a woman anywhere between INR25,000 and INR45,000 but it lacks continuity as women from go from one job contract to another. Owing to the considerable demand for these services in the northern districts of Kerala, however, many women who had previously worked as migrant domestic workers had shifted to this occupation.[87] But in the case of Uma's family, with Uma overseas and the children to take care of, her sister was unable to take up work any longer.

In the social milieu of Kerala, women migrants often sought to underline the lack of a male provider to justify their decision to migrate. An analysis of Malayali migrant women's narratives suggest that they sought to mobilize circumstances that would elicit sympathy and in an effort to circumvent adverse gender norms.[88] The breakdown of a marriage could occur due to the death of a husband, divorce or separation, but the breakdown of marital provisioning was broader, as it could also result from

84 Interviewed by telephone, May 2019. Aruna was in Saudi Arabia.

85 Interview, Trivandrum, coastal village, 2013

86 Interview by phone from Sharjah, where Suhara was located, in May 2019.

87 Interviews with women and their families in the highland villages in Kollam, Trivandrum and Malappuram and in a slum in Trivandrum in 2013 and 2019.

88 See Kodoth (2014) for an analysis of women's narratives that makes this argument.

circumstances in which the male breadwinner was incapacitated owing to ill health, or simply because he was irresponsible and unwilling to provide. It was possible to capture only the former through the sample survey, but there were important differences in the manifestations of marital breakdown between communities in Kerala.

Separation and divorce represent the reality of breakdown of provisioning better among the Muslims in the sample than among the Catholics. Among the coastal Christians in Trivandrum (Latin Catholics), women could not conceive of the idea of seeking divorce, whereas among Muslims, the migrant women interviewed rarely tolerated oppressive marriages. However, Muslim women also frequently reported that their husbands had left them with or without seeking divorce, referred to as abandonment. Within Kerala, this difference was reflected in a significantly higher proportion of first-time migrant women from Malappuram who were divorced or separated (46 per cent) than among first-time migrant women from Trivandrum (15 per cent).

Irrespective of field sites, when young, unmarried girls migrated, the decision to migrate varied on individual lines. In some of these instances, young women had assumed the burden of providing for their families. Rehana, cited in Section 3.2, spoke about how she had contributed to repaying her family's debts from her earnings as a MWDW. Rama, who was from East Godavari, took up a job in Oman in 2006, when she was only 18 years old, because her mother, a single parent, was unwell and her younger sister was in school. She dropped out of school and sought work at first on the local labour market. However, a daily wage of INR50 was too low to make ends meet. She then decided to go overseas and obtained a visa with the help of a relative in Oman. Rama's mother died a few months before the interview with Rama in 2013, and Rama's younger sister was working in Oman at the time. Rama's relatives were searching for a bridegroom for her, and Rama said she would decide about returning to work in the Middle East only after getting married.[89]

In 1995, Majida was only 18 years old when she took up employment as a domestic worker in Kuwait. Living in a highland village in Trivandrum, Majida's father sold fish for a living. "He did not have the means to get us married." Majida decided to migrate because she wanted to improve all their lives. But her family would not have permitted her to go, and so she approached a local broker.

> My maternal aunt was there [in Kuwait]. But I went through an agent … We did not have a secure income, no house … we were four children; I was the eldest, two boys and a girl. At the time, I had an ambition, somewhere I must buy five cents of land, my sister must get married, and after that I must help my family – one by one, I must help each of them to gain a secure position. That was why I went. I spent INR30,000 to go. Even a loan of INR10, I was scared of then. But I took INR30,000 as a loan and went!

A "good" job, or a job that is perceived as desirable, may motivate families to send even a very young girl overseas. In what may be a rare instance, Krupa, a 13-year-old girl from a village in East Godavari, had replaced her maternal aunt as a domestic worker in the household of a South African family in Bahrain. This was in 2007, when Krupa's family did not want to lose the job because Krupa's maternal aunt wanted to take up a more independent job with better monetary prospects in the local market. Krupa explained that her family was motivated to send her because the job was not taxing and the employers were good people.[90] As a result of this experience, Krupa was able to speak haltingly in English. She worked as a domestic worker until her family arranged her marriage when she was 17 years old.

89 Interviews in Kadapa and East Godavari in 2013.

90 Conversations with Krupa and her mother in East Godavari, February 2013. The author met Krupa's mother in a shared autorickshaw and later visited her house, where she met Krupa. She had casual conversations with Krupa and her mother, but her mother was unwilling to be interviewed. The family also expressed discomfort and cut short an interview with Krupa, after the first half an hour. Prior to the interview, however, Krupa took the author around the village to show her the church that had been recently constructed, of which she, as a new convert, was very proud. During this time also she spoke of her experience as a migrant worker.

4. How do women migrate? Governance and intermediation of migration

Overseas employment, especially in the Middle East, is an ordinary aspect of life in the source regions of Kerala and AP. Most people in these areas have relatives, friends or acquaintances employed in the Middle East, who relay information about migrant jobs and help aspirants to obtain visas. The modes of recruiting MWDWs range from direct recruitment by employers, migration along with families, recruitment through licensed recruitment agencies and unauthorized intermediaries or migration on visas obtained from friends and acquaintances that are directly sourced from employers.[91] Social networks are believed to be the most widely used channel of recruitment of workers, particularly for women workers.[92] However, MWDWs are recruited in ways that frequently blur the distinction between social networks and commercial intermediation. For even when visas are obtained through social networks and personal connections, the services of a range of intermediaries are usually unavoidable because of the cumbersome procedures for obtaining emigration clearance laid down by the Indian government.

A defining feature of the recruitment of women as domestic workers is the dominance of unauthorized intermediaries and irregular practices. Intermediation is highly dispersed and, as pointed out by Breeding, thousands of irregular agents operate out of travel agencies, tea shops and private homes. The recruitment process could involve a chain of intermediaries connecting workers in source villages and towns to employers in the destination countries.[93] Private intermediaries are also believed to be the principal agents of the exploitation of women emigrants, and are portrayed in singular terms as extracting disproportionate sums of money from aspirants as well as subjecting them to harassment and exposing them to inordinate risks.[94]

Overarching representations of intermediation such as these resonate partially, at best, with the experiences of emigrant women and have impeded a more complex, layered and nuanced understanding of the processes of recruitment and migration. This chapter is an attempt to develop a fuller analysis by bringing in the perspectives and experiences of migration intermediaries and MWDWs. Section 4.1 below foregrounds the legal contexts in which intermediaries operate, summarizing the regulatory regimes for the recruitment and migration of women as domestic workers in India and in the Middle East. In the sections that follow, the focus is on what women migrants and migration intermediaries have to say about the processes of recruitment, migration and employment. The material is used to develop a typology of intermediaries and to engage critically with mobility practices as well as to unravel the complexity and the nuances of the relationships between MWDWs and private intermediaries. In the last section of this chapter, the cost and financing of the migration of women domestic workers is discussed.

4.1 Governance regimes of migration in India and the Middle East

The ECR category of passports was devised by the Indian government under the Emigration Act, 1983 as a mechanism to protect vulnerable workers from exploitation in overseas employment. Currently, it applies to citizens who have not completed school education and corresponds broadly to low-skilled workers.

91 See Breeding (2017).

92 See Rajan et al. (2011: 46-8).

93 Ibid.

94 This is a perception that has wide currency because of its espousal by the media as well as endorsement by government officials and a section of activists involved in rescue activities. Importantly, also as Breeding (2017) points out, travel agents possessed a sense of impunity arising from their conviction that they could use their political connections to overcome problems with the law.

Unlike workers with higher levels of education, who hold passports designated as emigration check not required (ECNR), migrants in the ECR category must obtain emigration clearance from the POE by submitting a set of documents that include passports, visas and work contracts for verification. The ECR category migrants are, however, eligible for ECNR endorsements on their passports when they complete four years of overseas employment.[95]

In practice, the ECR category has been used to discriminate against women workers by allowing the government to restrict their mobility and access to overseas employment, and this has spawned considerable irregular mobility. The minimum age of 30 years stipulated for ECR category women since the 1990s is higher than the minimum age for migrant women domestic workers from other major sending countries.[96] Women workers have protested against the restrictions imposed on them and until the first decade of the 2000s, the Indian government had responded to their protests by stepping back from extreme measures. Indira Gandhi, as prime minister, had banned the migration of single, uneducated women to Kuwait in the 1980s when, on a visit to the country, she learnt of the abusive treatment meted out to Indian domestic workers there. However, Goan and Malayali families had protested against the ban and "Indian officials *quietly* permitted resumption of the migration".[97] A respondent from East Godavari, who migrated to Kuwait in 1971, recalled having cancelled her plans to travel back home on a vacation because of the ban. She said her relatives at home cautioned her that if she went home, she may not be able to return to Kuwait.

In 1999, the GOI also banned the deployment of Indian workers as "housemaids" and as male domestic workers in Kuwait, citing the post-war turmoil and the resultant harassment

A respondent from East Godavari, who migrated to Kuwait in 1971, recalled having cancelled her plans to travel back home on a vacation because of the ban.

of foreign workers, especially those working in the domestic sector. The Indian ambassador in Kuwait announced the enforcement of this ban in March 2000.[98] But in May of the same year, the Ministry of Labour lifted the ban on male domestic workers, subject to the attestation of their documents by the Indian embassy in Kuwait. Subsequently, the Ministry of Labour reiterated that the "ban on housemaids remained in place", citing violations that had come to its notice.[99]

As pointed out in the introduction, restrictions were reinforced in the year 2007 to include work contracts attested by the Indian embassy for women recruits to obtain emigration clearance. Contracts would only be attested after sponsors provided the bank guarantee of $2,500. The introduction of this security deposit was opposed, and the government backed off initially but has since pushed ahead to enforce it and to further intensify restrictions.[100] The security deposit was refundable and intended to pay for the repatriation of the worker if the need arose. Its imposition first created disquiet among destination countries, and though most countries had accepted the condition by 2011, Kuwait had refused. As a result, the condition was enforced for women migrating to Kuwait only from 2014. As pointed out in Chapter 3, the enforcement of the security deposit had a drastic effect on regular migration of women in the ECR category to the Middle East.

95 Conversation with one of the POEs. Women's versions varied from four to five years. I was not able to locate any reference to this provision on the MEA website.

96 Sri Lanka began to increase restrictions on women migrating as domestic workers after it began to focus on increasing male migration in the past two decades. Since then, they have raised the minimum age for women to migrate from 18 to 25 years, and at present they do not permit women with children who are less than 5 years old to migrate. The minimum age in Bangladesh is 24 years, but it recently enforced an upper limit of 35 years, purportedly to prevent women younger than the minimum age from fudging their age on passports. The Philippines faced resistance when it raised the minimum age from 18 to 25 years in 2006, and subsequently lowered it to 23 years (Kodoth, 2016, 2018).

97 Weiner (1982); emphasis added.

98 Jureidini (2003: 11).

99 For references to government orders, see Kodoth and Varghese (2012)

100 Kodoth and Varghese (2012).

The Indian government justifies barriers against the mobility of women in the ECR category as necessary to prevent exploitation. In September 2016, the MEA mandated that recruitment would be done through the eMigrate system, an online process of registration, screening and monitoring of applications that also allows foreign employers to recruit directly.[101] The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) was merged with the MEA in January 2016. According to the government, this was done to strengthen the PGE "to deal with emergencies involving Indians in various crisis-prone countries in West Asia".

Following the merger, the recruitment of MWDWs was brought under the exclusive confines of six notified, state-run agencies (all of them under the jurisdiction of state/provincial governments). The MEA justified this move citing a "reported increase in complaints of exploitation of female workers going to the 18 ECR countries and to safeguard and protect such workers."[102] In September 2017, the MEA cancelled the security deposit for sponsors who recruited women domestic workers through authorised state-run agencies, admitting that "[e]mployers of female domestic workers and Recruitment Agencies" were concerned that the security deposit "has been a key factor in discouraging recruitment of Indian female domestic workers through eMigrate system."[103]

To understand the relevance of the ECR category as a mechanism to prevent the exploitation of women migrants, it is also necessary to lay out the framework of governance of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East. Emigration clearance from the Indian government is largely inconsequential in determining a migrant worker's legal position or her employment prospects once she is in the Middle East. The narrow promise of emigration clearance pertains only to the support that migrant workers may claim from the Indian embassy if they are in distress. But even this limited claim is undermined by two factors – the realities of the sponsorship system in the Middle East and the limited outreach of the Indian embassies.

The Kafala system, which governs sponsorship and recruitment in the Middle Eastern countries, ties migrant workers to their sponsors and thereby grants to sponsors extraordinary powers. The system itself is somewhat amorphous, as it is a complex combination of formal rules found in legislation and policies along with norms arising from customs and practices. As a result, entrenched practices may persist despite laws to the contrary. For instance, laws in most of the countries prohibit sponsors, or even recruiters, from taking custody of migrant workers' passports and yet, the practice is noted to be widely prevalent. The system also mandates that sponsors should pay for the visa and emigration expenses of the workers they recruit, and yet workers are made to pay substantial sums of money to intermediaries to finance their journeys.

Workers rarely benefit from the large sums paid by sponsors for their migration expenses because it is siphoned off systematically by the recruitment industry. However, the provision has oppressive consequences for migrant workers because sponsors often come to feel a sense of entitlement over migrant workers owing to the money they invest in their journeys. Women's narratives underlined this. Many of the respondent MWDWs pointed out that when they complained to their sponsors about the non-payment of salaries or the excruciatingly long work hours, their sponsors had justified their actions saying that they had paid a large sum of money to recruit them.

Sponsors assert control over workers by taking custody of their passports and restricting their freedom of movement, all of which are indicators of forced labour. Without their passports, workers find it difficult to leave their employers, but in grave circumstances they had been driven to escape without their documents. As they are unable to establish their identity without their documents, workers fleeing abusive situations may be unable to secure access to the Indian embassies, which are also generally believed to be unsympathetic to poor migrant workers.[104] In contrast to the Philippines, which requires

101 Z-11025/89/2017-OE-III, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, circular dated 1 September 2016.

102 Z-11025/126/2015-Emig. (pt.File), Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, order dated 2 August 2016.

103 Embassy of India in Oman, 18 September 2017, accessed on 17 October 2017. See also notifications by the embassy of India in Kuwait.

104 See discussion in Esim Simel and Monica Smith eds. (2004).

their embassies to not discriminate between documented and undocumented workers, Indian embassies reportedly deny workers entry without documents. Filipino activists in Kuwait pointed out that Indian workers sometimes go to the Sri Lankan embassy because of the callous attitude of their own embassy.[105] This renders the promise of protection through the ECR mechanism hollow.

If the legal status of an ECR-category worker when she exits India is determined by emigration clearance from the POE, on entry in the destination country, her legal status is determined by her visa. Therefore, a worker who leaves India through an irregular route (without the prescribed emigration clearance) may enter the destination as a regular migrant if she has a valid visa. Further, once she begins to work in the destination country, her legal status is determined by whether she works within the parameters of her visa. Classifications in the Middle East differentiate between visas for domestic work and visas for employment in commercial establishments (referred to by the respondents of this study as "company visas"). All household workers including male workers are expected to possess domestic work visas.

When workers are recruited through recruitment agencies in the destination, the agency is required to place a MWDW with a sponsor within a short period of time, usually three months. During this period, the agency may on request from the employer change the worker or on request from the worker change the employer. Once this this period is over, however, such changes can no longer be made. The formalities of sponsorship require the sponsor to obtain a residence permit, i.e., the *iquama* for the migrant worker, which also serves as an identity document.

However, visa rules are flouted routinely by sponsors and/or by recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies may flout visa rules with the active knowledge and connivance of sponsors, who are known to employ workers who are on domestic work visas in commercial establishments and vice versa. For instance, following the recent changes in Indian regulations, it has been observed that many women migrants are being employed in households on "company visas" (discussed in Chapter 5).

Visa trading is a well-known feature of migration in the Middle East. Sponsors who are entitled to more visas than they have use for tend to offload the "surplus" visas on to the black market, where they are obtained by migrant workers or recruitment agencies for a hefty price. These visas are referred to variously as free visas, *azad* visas and private visas. Migrant workers may obtain "free visas" directly from sponsors or from intermediaries but must pay a hefty price for them. Free visas or private visas are not legal categories. The visas are bona fide, their irregularity arises from their sale. Ironically, the terms "free visa" or "private visa" denotes the freedom or autonomy that migrant workers experience when they act in an irregular manner, i.e., they purchase their own visa.

Workers on "free visas" are free to the extent that they are expected to find employment for themselves and are independent in this respect from their sponsors. For workers on "free visas", the sponsor is a legal category but not a substantive economic provider. In contrast to a formal employment relationship, which ties migrant workers to their sponsors in a relationship of dependence, a free visa entails the separation of the sponsor from the employer and provides workers with a degree of everyday autonomy.

Free visas may be seen as a euphemism for work on an informal market, which is irregular but thrives in the Middle East. Employment on the informal market is varied – workers may obtain full-time, live-in jobs with the employer, which resembles the formal sponsorship relationship; they may also take up multiple part-time jobs and combine them with irregular jobs or depend on short term irregular employment contracts. For instance, part-time workers from Kerala spoke of taking up irregular jobs on weekends when families got together for parties or during Ramzan (Ramadan) when there was a demand for additional workers. Irregular jobs were also availed of by a section of workers who specialized in post-natal care for mothers for 40 days immediately after the delivery of a child and by workers took up temporary employment in place of those who had gone on vacation.

105 Conversation in November 2018.

Women migrants obtained free visas in several ways. Close relatives who were already employed overseas were an important source, but they may have also obtained them from recruiters or on their own using informal networks developed while working for a sponsor. For instance, Tracy, a migrant domestic worker from a coastal village in Trivandrum, switched to a free visa in Bahrain in 2007 after working full-time for a sponsor for eight years. "There is no such visa, actually", she explained. "Someone stands in as the sponsor for a fee and we can work wherever we want". Tracy obtained a free visa through a friend in Bahrain and in the five years that she had been working on a free visa, Tracy has not seen her sponsor.

The costs incurred when women work on free visas are considerably higher than in formal employment for sponsors. Tracy paid 500 Bahraini dinars (BHD) (more than INR80,000) for her visa in 2007 and has paid a similar amount to renew it every two years. Depending on how they are obtained, free visas cost upwards of INR100,000. Fauzia, who is from a highland village in Kollam, paid INR100,000 in 2015 to her neighbour, who was employed in Bahrain, for a free visa. In addition, workers on free visas are responsible for their own travel and emigration costs and for additional costs when they live in rented accommodation.

Therefore, workers on free visas must have significantly higher earnings in order to make good their investments. Tracy's salary nearly doubled to BHD110 (INR12,000) from BHD60 (INR6,500) in 2007 when she started working on the informal labour market. In 2012, she earned the equivalent INR22,000 a month in a full-time job with a Malayali family. Women who take up multiple part-time jobs may earn significantly more as part-time workers are paid hourly wages. Lateefa, who worked in Sharjah until 2013, said she could earn as much as INR50,000 a month by supplementing her part-time jobs with irregular assignments. To save on the costs of accommodation, women often shared rooms or rented bed spaces.

Women who were on family visas had also obtained employment as domestic workers on the informal labour market, but this is relatively rare because women usually travel alone to take up employment as domestic workers. In addition, MWDWs and/or their spouses do not usually meet the minimum income required to obtain a family visa. In one instance, a migrant domestic worker said she and her husband had obtained a family visa in Dubai through irregular means.[106]

In another instance, Darshana, cited in Chapter 3, explained that she had worked in Dubai on a family visa for seven years before she returned to care for her ailing mother-in-law in 2017. Her husband earned AED4000 as a driver in Dubai, which qualified him to obtain a family visa. As a spouse on a family visa, however, Darshana was not legally permitted to work. She said that her husband and she were very careful during those seven years to prevent detection and that her husband would drop and pick her up from her workplace. When she migrated for the first time in 1999, soon after her marriage, her family had obtained a free visa for her and she had worked for a family from Bombay. She said she did not fear detection at the time because she lived in a set of rooms that were adjacent to her employer's house

Because visa trading is profitable for sponsors and intermediaries, it generates supply in excess of demand. As a result, migrant workers may be unable to find adequate employment and may sustain losses. Asma's experience shows how migrant women may suffer from scarcity of employment. Asma, who is from a highland village in Malappuram, returned from Saudi Arabia in 2018 before her visa expired because she was unable to find sufficient work. Asma depended mostly on employment as a post-natal caregiver and tided over lean periods by working as a domestic worker for families of her acquaintance.[107]

Asma started migrating in 2012. She went to Riyadh on a "company visa" but was shifted from one place to another until after two months, she found work as a member of the cleaning staff in a jail. Disappointed with the job, she, along with two women recruited by the same company, "ran away" to Jeddah with the help of a Malayali man who had assisted them to recharge their phones. This man encouraged them to leave their sponsor and promised his assistance to obtain jobs outside. Subsequently, Asma worked

106 Interview, coastal village, Trivandrum, 2013.

107 Interview, Malappuram, June 2019.

in irregular jobs mostly for Malayali families for three and a half years. With her savings, she obtained a free visa for 6,000 Saudi Arabian Riyals (SAR) (approximately INR200,000–250,000) before going home on her first vacation. She worked in Jeddah for another three years, spending SAR5,000 every year to renew her residence permit.

People in the source regions of AP and Kerala were not only very familiar with but also oriented towards employment in the Middle East. The survey data showed that over one-third of the women migrants in the sample had their passports issued before they took the decision to migrate, and some of them had done so several years ahead of their first journey (Table 4.1).

In the source regions of Kerala and AP, migrant workers' success in tapping remunerative opportunities has had a demonstration effect. This may explain why women may go abroad repeatedly even when they have faced severe abuse earlier. Thus, in the prevailing environment, emigration clearance from the POE, which is the Indian government's mechanism for mitigating risks, may be far removed from the concerns of women aspirants when they make their decision to migrate.

As we have seen above, the governance regimes of migration in India and the Middle East have given rise to irregular practices and led to their adoption on a wide scale. The Kafala system in the Middle Eastern countries vests sponsors with inordinate powers, but it also generates incentives and trade-offs for MWDWs to choose between the types of employment that are available in the destination countries. The manipulation of the legal framework for migration in the Middle Eastern countries may prompt MWDWs to seek employment on the informal market (which they do by opting to migrate on free visas). The following section discusses in greater detail the incentives and trade-offs that may determine whether MWDWs choose regular full-time employment with a sponsor or jobs on the informal labour market.

4.2 Regular employment vs employment on the informal market

Work on the informal labour market in the Middle Eastern countries is considered more lucrative, and yet women may decline these jobs and opt for regular live-in employment with sponsors for a variety of reasons. Financial concerns may also motivate women to opt for regular employment with their sponsors. It has been pointed out that the money paid by sponsors for workers' emigration costs is usually misappropriated by intermediaries. But, workers have benefitted from this provision on subsequent journeys, when they have returned to work as full-time regular workers for the same sponsor or obtained a new visa directly from a sponsor in the destination country. Further, MWDWs may develop ties of intimacy with a sponsor's family; or they may feel more secure in regular, formal employment even with difficult working conditions and relatively low salaries.[108]

A key trade-off that workers deal with is between personal security and remuneration. As discussed in the previous section, the returns to domestic work may be significantly higher on the informal market than in regular live-in employment with a sponsor. But working "outside" on the informal labour market also includes high risks in the form of the possibility of detection and deportation. Some of the workers who had chosen to be in regular full-time employment with their sponsors spoke of their fears of being apprehended by the police. However, this risk may be managed by workers, for instance, when they receive strong support

TABLE 4.1. PASSPORTS AND WOMEN'S DECISION TO MIGRATE

	Kerala	AP
Women who had passports issued before deciding to migrate	37.7 (77)	35.9 (107)
Women who had passports issued after deciding to migrate	62.3 (127)	64.1 (191)
Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**

Source: Sample survey, 2013

108 For a discussion of cases, see Kodoth (2016, 2017).

from their sponsors, who may be willing to bail them out. Those who work on the informal market may offset this risk either by diversifying their networks and/or strengthening their personal connections with sponsors.

Often, the most vulnerable MWDWs who work on the informal market are the category of undocumented workers. They are workers who have lost possession of their legal documents or have remained in the destination country after their visas expired. Workers who "run away" from their sponsors without retrieving their legal documents are rendered undocumented. In such situations, sponsors may report them to the police and cancel their residence permits. But sponsors may also play foul. In one instance of a worker who was on a free visa, her sponsor cancelled the visa before it was due for renewal without informing her. The MWDW learnt of this, to her shock, when she was apprehended by the police. Workers who are aware of their undocumented status may depend on their social networks and personal connections to find employment and to remain undetected.

Women's experiences in regular work for their sponsors varied widely. Some of them had overcome initial difficulties, including the non-payment or part payment of salaries, verbal and even physical violence, and had gone on to establish long-term working relationships with their employers.[109] Respondents underscored the importance of being able to communicate with their employers based importantly on being able to speak a language that the employer understood.

Beena, a fish vendor from Trivandrum, who was paid for only three of her first five months of work in Kuwait, and had been subject to physical violence, said her sponsor's attitude changed dramatically after she learnt to speak Arabic. Three years after she arrived in Kuwait, her sponsor refused to permit her to go home. Beena pleaded with them but to no effect. Then she rebelled. "In that situation, I said to her, 'If you don't send me home, I will consume something and die.' Once I learnt the language, I gained the courage to speak back to them, to match word for word." Beena resented the fact that on her first visit her sponsor made her work in three households – the sponsor's own and those of her two children – and agreed to return to work for the same sponsor only on the condition that she would not be made to work in multiple households. Believing that sponsors are better disposed towards workers who can communicate with them and those who are better trained, some first-time MWDWs whose families were in the destination country had nevertheless chosen to live with Arab families in order to learn Arabic.

A section of MWDWs who were interviewed had tolerated inadequate food, low salaries, verbal and even physical violence for many years. Lathika summed up the orientation of emigrant domestic workers. "If you go on this housemaid visa, even if you go correctly, there are problems there. When we leave home, we go to make a living, so we will tolerate a great deal, we will hold on and try to stay there, even when there are problems, violence and confusion." But women feel that their suffering comes to naught when they are not paid. During the six months she spent in Saudi Arabia, Lathika was overworked and not paid. "Six months in Saudi, I did not even get a rupee as salary. As for work, from morning onwards, from 6 in the morning, we have to start work, from then till 2 in the morning ... The children were a nuisance. There were 10 or 15 children. They beat you. Just like that they come and hit you."

Women whose relationships with their employers had broken down owing to abusive treatment had not been dissuaded from obtaining overseas employment repeatedly. Repeat migrants believed that it was possible to find better employment overseas than that which was available at home.[110] Several respondents recounted stories of good, caring relations with employers. Nageshwari, for instance, who was from a village in Kadapa, and has been cited in chapter 3, described her employer in the following terms. "In that house, the madam was so good, she meant more to me that my mother and my husband ... She would give me rice and roti and ask me to eat first and only then to work. It is through the grace of Allah that I got this house. She used to listen to what I had to say."[111]

109 For discussion of how women cultivate patronage relations as a means of sustaining employment, see Kodoth (2016).

110 Discussed at greater length in Kodoth (2016 a).

111 OBC, Kadapa, Interview, Nov (2013).

Beena also pointed to the affection she was held in. In the initial period, as described above, she had been treated harshly but gradually she had established a position for herself in the household. Referring to her sponsor's daughter, she said: "She would hug me and plant a kiss on each cheek when she came home even if I was soiled from work in the kitchen." Beena was among those who spoke of having enjoyed a sense of freedom within their employers' households.[112] She had free reign over the kitchen, even providing food to distressed emigrant workers on occasion. Stories such as these had a demonstration effect in the sending regions, raising aspirations and shaping expectations.

There is a strong perception in the source areas that is also shared by at least a section of government officials and private recruiters that the boundary between migrant domestic work and sex work is blurred and/or porous. Sex work in the Middle Eastern countries is also believed to be more lucrative than regular domestic work. Two workers in our sample who said they had done sex work also pointed this out. Typically, respondent MWDWs would in a general way allude to domestic workers who also engage in sex work (rarely naming anyone in particular). Interestingly, their reports suggest that sexual services may be provided by domestic workers within regular live-in forms of employment to men in the sponsors' household or as a form of irregular employment. As against this, when sex work was provided on the market, it could be either as freelance sex workers or in brothels. It was also reported that some women who worked as part-time domestic workers also worked part-time as sex workers. From the narratives of workers, it was evident that the customers of migrant women from India who engaged in freelance and part-time sex work were usually from South Asia.

In the course of their overseas careers, some workers had moved between full-time sex work and full-time domestic work. A respondent from Trivandrum interviewed in 2013 said she had sought out sex work in the UAE after a stint as a domestic worker in Kuwait because the returns were much higher than for domestic work. She had worked as a freelance sex worker for a decade in the UAE, after which she obtained a job as a care worker in Israel. Two women interviewed in Trivandrum in 2017 and 2019 respectively said they had been trafficked for sex work but had managed to find their way back without engaging in paid sex. A respondent from East Godavari interviewed in 2013 revealed that she had been compelled to engage in sex work with Arab men by her recruitment agency. From her description, it was apparent that the agency provided women to Arab male clients for short durations ranging from a month to a few months.

A few respondents spoke about "duplicate families", a nomenclature for a specific type of living arrangement among migrant workers that involved men and women who migrated alone leaving their spouses at home in India. Migrant men and women who arrive in the destination countries without their families may establish temporary new domestic units in the destination that resemble a marital unit. This mode of living was adopted by women who took up irregular forms of employment and lived "outside". The reports by emigrant respondents suggested that in these arrangements, the male partner paid for the living expenses while the woman took charge of the domestic chores. The term "duplicate family" was used by respondents from Trivandrum. Respondents in East Godavari and Kadapa provided descriptions of similar living arrangements, though they did not use the term.

4.3 Sponsors, employers and migrant domestic workers

Problem narratives about migration that circulate in India have given rise to stereotypes of MWDWs but also of Arab sponsors and expatriate Indian employers. The shift to public sector recruitment of Indian MWDWs in 2016 came in the wake of huge media attention on an incident that occurred in September 2015. The incident involved Kasturi Munirathinam, a domestic worker from Tamil Nadu who was working in Saudi Arabia and who fell from a third-floor window of her employer's house sustaining severe injuries. Fearing violence from her employer, Kasturi had attempted to escape from the house. A careful reading of media reports shows that Kasturi could not understand Arabic, which had led to a severe misunderstanding between her and her employer. Matters came

112 See cases discussed in Kodoth (2016, 2017).

to a head when she left the employer's house to meet a Tamil-speaking man in the area. On learning about this, her employer seems to have reacted very aggressively as a result of which, Kasturi feared for her life and attempted a dangerous escape.

The employer's conduct and Kasturi's response may be seen in the context of heightened suspicion of workers by their employers on the one hand and the fears of workers that their employers may harm them on the other hand. Sponsors suspect that migrant workers reach out to their compatriots in the destination in order to "run away" and seek better opportunities "outside" on the informal market, while workers may reach out to their compatriots for fear of impending harm by their employers. Importantly, however, this incident was reported in the Indian media in sensational terms that reinforced the racial coding of behaviour by Arab sponsors as brutal and stoked public outrage among the Indian public. Unsurprisingly, the Indian government had considered a total ban on mobility of women in the wake of this incident.[113]

Multiple stereotypes are implicated in media reports and the perspectives of Indian officials about the recruitment and migration of domestic workers. Arab sponsors are characterized routinely as brutal, in contrast to expatriate Indian employers, who are depicted usually as benign. MWDWs are almost unfailingly represented as uneducated and naïve or as deceitful and immoral and, therefore, unfit for migration. The words of an official concerned with emigration encapsulate these stereotypes:

> The women [migrant domestic workers] who come here, often they know nothing. They do not know what is written in the contract. The women who go to work for foreign sponsors, I think they know what to expect. They do not go believing that it will be a good situation ... If you have a proper family, you will not let women migrate. It is a horrible situation there, as far as I know. The only exception is when women go with a sponsor who is from here [India]. Such sponsors come here [to the office]. I allow them. They employ as domestic helps, someone they know well, usually someone known to the family, maybe a neighbour or relative. They have to do that because they will be leaving the house and their children in the care of these women. With these employers, women workers have nothing to fear but with the Arab employers, they cannot be sure of anything.[114]

The official slips easily into the position of Indian expatriate employers and instinctively justifies the choices they make. This need not be surprising because Indian government officials and expatriate employers do share a broad class position. A shared class position that allows an official to "see" from the perspective of an Indian expatriate employer simultaneously underscores the social distance that separates government officials from MWDWs. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the official fails to note that the interests of MWDWs and Indian expatriate employers may not coincide. The official also fails to take into account that domestic workers are also exploited and abused by Indian employers, whether expatriate or within the country. Seen in this light, the interpretations of violations of rights in the Middle East in racial or ethnic terms by Indian officials and the Indian public may miss the point altogether.

The MWDWs in the sample had worked with employers of different nationalities and, as Table 4.2 shows, some of them had worked with employers of multiple nationalities. As mentioned earlier, their experiences of employment varied. While a section of respondents from Kerala underlined the trade-off between personal safety and earnings that made them choose to work for Indian expatriates, others had made different choices.

According to respondent MWDWs, a prominent feature of employment by Indian expatriates is the relatively low salaries paid by them. Indian employers may exploit the vulnerability of MWDWs who fear working for Arab nationals because they do not speak the language or

113 The former Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, wrote on Twitter, "Chopping of [the] hand of [an] Indian lady — we are very much disturbed over the brutal manner in which [this] Indian lady has been treated in Saudi Arabia" (cited by Al Jazeera and wire services, 9 October 2015). A report noted that India was considering "a total ban on recruitment of housemaids" in view of "frequent allegations of sex slavery, arm-chopping and sadistic domestic torture of housemaids in Saudi Arabia" (Bhattacharjee, 2015). For a discussion of the Indian government response to the incident and the interventions that followed in its wake, see (Kodoth, 2020).

114 Conversation, January 2014. For analysis of more such official narratives see Kodoth (2014, 2016).

because of a previous experience of abuse by an Arab employer. An MWDW who had been employed by an Indian expatriate family in Dubai in 2013 pointed out that she received only Rs 8,000 a month. "I take what they give me. The salary is low and that is a problem. In their brother's house, there is a Filipina maid who gets [the equivalent of] INR20,000."

One reason for why Indian employers in Dubai may pay low salaries is that they incur higher costs of sponsorship there. Therefore, they may seek to reduce their total costs by paying workers less. Undocumented MWDWs were especially vulnerable in this respect and some respondents who had been in this position had worked for Indian employers at low and stagnant wage rates. A worker from East Godavari who worked for a Malayali family when she was undocumented, having "run away" from an Arab sponsor who treated her badly, said that her circumstances made it impossible for her ask her employer to increase her salary.

Some of the MWDWs from Kerala spoke poorly about their Malayali employers. Annie, who is from a coastal village in Trivandrum, had held many jobs in several Middle Eastern countries in an overseas career spanning over two decades. She had during this time also worked full-time with Malayali families. Annie described Malayali employers as "*kanjhi*" (rice gruel) to indicate that they were tight-fisted. Their faults, according to her, included suspicion that workers would "steal" food. Lateefa, who was from a highland village in Trivandrum, pointed out that in Sharjah the Malayali employer of a young girl she had helped recruit had installed a CCTV camera in the house to monitor the worker.

The narratives of some MWDWs showed that Arab sponsors could pay significantly higher salaries than expatriate Indian employers. Sherin had worked for 12 years in Kuwait in a regular job with an Arab sponsor. When she started working in Kuwait in 1993, she received the equivalent of INR10,000 a month and her salary had risen to the equivalent of INR23,000 by the end of her stint in Kuwait in 2005. There was also a clear division of tasks in the household among the three domestic workers employed there. A Sri Lankan woman did the housework and cooking, and a Filipina woman was in charge of the upper floors of the house. Sherin took care of the children and, because she knew tailoring, helped her employer in her tailoring shop. Sherin was forced to cancel her visa and return home because her husband began to neglect the children. She had since then separated from her husband, who cheated her of the house she acquired with her earnings from Kuwait. In 2018, at the age of 48 years, she had taken up employment with a Malayali doctor to regain some material stability. She received INR20,000 a month, less than what she earned in Kuwait in 2005.

Some MWDWs wished to continue working for Indian expatriate employers even when they were dissatisfied with relatively low salaries. Suhara, cited in chapter 3, who started working for a Malayali family in Sharjah in 2018, was not entirely happy with her salary of INR20,000 as she had earned about INR15,000 per month in a small business at home prior to migration. But she had not mentioned this to the family. She had other reasons to value the relationship with her employer as well as other expectations from them. Suhara was employed to take care of a small child and she also did much of the housework. She said her employer treated her as a family member and among other things, they all sat down together at the dining table to have food. While she did not want to work for an Arab family because she did not know the language, Suhara also pointed out that she needed to work overseas for some years in order to repay the loans she had taken to finance the wedding of the elder of her two daughters and to earn money to pay for her younger daughter's wedding. When this employer no longer needed her, she said she would request them to find her a job with another Malayali family.

A Malayali domestic worker from a privileged caste highlighted an important distinction between Arab sponsors and Indian employers. At the time of the interview in 2013, this worker held a job with a Malayali family but had worked previously with Arab employers. She said her Malayali employer had been good to her, advising her about how to save money and manage her alcoholic husband, but it pained her that the employer treated her "as a servant".[115] To explain this, she said, "It was different with my Arab employers. When guests came to the

115 Interview, Trivandrum city, 2013

house, the mama [lady employer] would put her arm around me and tell them that I was her sister." By contrast, she said her Malayali employer expected her to stay out of view whenever there were guests.

Fictive kinship and patronage ties are, of course, also employed by Indian employers. This was evident, for instance, from Suhara's narrative. But while there are limits to using these as frames to evaluate the employment relationship (it is pertinent to note that as frames, kinship and patronage are not substitutes for fair and equitable employment practices), it also bears recognition that women migrant workers valued these ties that they were able to establish with their overseas employers. As is evident from the narrative of the privileged caste woman above, the conventional "mistress-maid" relationship that was familiar in their home context, could deprive women workers of dignity. By contrast, Arab sponsors broke important symbolic barriers [of caste and class] when they expressed affection in ways that were unfamiliar in the "mistress-maid" relationship of the Indian context.

Table 4.2 shows that Arab nationals comprised an overwhelmingly large proportion of the employers of the MWDWs in our sample. This was mostly as full-time live-in workers. Rarely did women mention being employed as part-time workers for Arab nationals. The exceptions were those respondents who had taken up short-duration assignments in the households of Arab nationals. Workers in full-time jobs in Arab households referred to part-time workers replacing a full-time worker when the latter went home on vacation. They also referred to Arab sponsors who employed part-time workers for a short duration in order to train a new worker.

The table shows that MWDWs from AP had worked largely for Arab employers, whereas women from Kerala had a more diverse set of employers, including expatriates from Kerala. Women from Kerala benefited from the demand for more specialized services in the destination countries which they were able to cater to and had harnessed more diverse connections in the destination country to find employment. Also, it is possible that the women from AP persisted with Arab employers because they found that regular employment is beneficial. There is some evidence for this in Section 4.5 ahead. Being less educated and with fewer networks and connections than Malayali workers, it may be that workers from AP leverage the resources they accumulate in the course of employment and choose to continue in long-term employment with the same sponsor.

Almost half of the MWDWs from Kerala in the sample had worked for Indian expatriate employers at one time or another. Migrant women from Kerala were better able to tap into not only the demand for domestic workers from relatively affluent/professionally employed Malayali expatriates, but also the demand from other Indian families than women from AP. Even with respect to employers from AP, women workers from AP did not enjoy a significant advantage over workers from Kerala. The sizeable presence of people from Kerala in virtually all walks of life in the Middle Eastern countries may have given Malayali domestic workers an edge in gaining access to a more varied set of opportunities in these countries.

Another feature of Indian expatriate employers in the Middle East is that they were rarely the actual sponsors of the MWDWs they employed. It was not unusual for women who held full-time,

TABLE 4.2. NATIONALITIES OF EMPLOYERS OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN PERCENTAGES

Nationality of employer	Kerala	AP
Arab nationals	79.41 (162)	96.30 (287)
Other foreigners	13.72 (28)	6.38 (19)
Indian – Kerala	35.29 (72)	1.34 (4)
Indian – AP (undivided)	2.45 (5)	3.02 (9)
Indian – others	9.31 (19)	1.01 (3)
Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Total exceeds 100 % because some women had worked with employers of more than one nationality		

Source: Sample survey, 2013

live-in employment with Indian families to reveal that their sponsor was actually an Arab national, who was their employer's employer. In one instance, however, it was apparent that a MWDW from Kerala was in fact employed by her sponsor because his name appeared on her visa.

A sizeable segment of the demand from expatriate Indian employers seems to be for part-time workers. Recently, it has become possible for migrant domestic workers to work part-time in the UAE through Tadbeer Centres and on flexi-work permits in Bahrain,[116] but part-time jobs have long been institutionalized in the Middle East. Advertisements for part-time workers have appeared regularly in newspapers and could refer, for instance, to the preferences of employers for workers of specific nationalities. Part-time workers are paid hourly wages and acknowledged wage rates are quoted for jobs on the informal market. It must also be pointed out that employers also benefit when they employ part-time workers because they do not incur the sponsorship or subsistence costs of a full-time worker.

A small section of women migrants had worked for other foreigners. Lateefa, who has been cited earlier in this section, said she had found jobs with "English-speaking families" in an apartment complex in Sharjah after she befriended a Tamil security guard there. Over time, she worked less for Malayali families and more for English and Arabic-speaking ones. She counted Pakistanis, Bengalis, Hindi-speaking families, Egyptians, Syrians, Iranians, Dutch, Russians and others among her employers. Lacking English language skills, Indian women may be at a disadvantage in obtaining employment with the other foreigners category of employers, especially when compared to Filipina women. These employers were perceived as a desired category of employers as they maintained a mostly professional approach towards workers, paid them well and observed other good practices.

Women from AP had similar access to foreign and Indian employers. This may be understood in terms of the characteristics of the sample from AP. While the bulk of the women from AP lacked literacy, a higher proportion of women from AP than from Kerala had a more than school-level education. Employers in the other foreigners' category included professionals working in large corporations. A respondent from East Godavari reported that she was employed successively by foreign employees of a large corporation who took up residence in the same house.

Over time, she worked less for Malayali families and more for English and Arabic-speaking ones.

Table 4.3 shows the number of members of a household reported by workers in the sample with respect to the last household they were employed in (if they were returnee workers) or their current employer's household (if they were emigrant). The table, which shows only workers in full-time employment, helps place in perspective the burden of full-time work in the Middle East. Women from AP worked for larger households than women from Kerala, and this may indicate their relative disadvantage as smaller households may be expected to have a lighter workload.

Less than half the MWDWs in the sample from Kerala were employed in households with over five members while 70 per cent of the women from AP were employed in such households. Notably, 25 per cent of Telugu women were employed in households with more than ten members compared to 15 per cent for women from Kerala. There were extreme instances of a single domestic worker employed in a household of up to 30 members. Two respondents, one each from Kerala and AP, reported that they were employed in households of 60 members. However, large households could also employ multiple domestic workers as was the case reported by several of the women from AP.

Respondents' assessment of their workload in their last or current jobs in Table 4.4 allows us to substantiate this picture. Almost 40 per cent of workers from Kerala thought their workload in their last or current job was very heavy or excessive compared to only 20 per cent of women from AP. This difference may be on account of how individual workers perceive their

116 For details of Bahrain's flexi-work permit that enables certain categories of workers to take up a range of "non-specialized" jobs on the labour market, see https://lmra.bh/portal/en/ page/show/325.

TABLE 4.3. NUMBER OF MEMBERS IN THE HOUSEHOLDS LAST WORKED IN BY RESPONDENTS

Number of members in household last worked in	Kerala	AP
1 to 5	55.90 (109)	29.17 (84)
6 to 10	29.23 (57)	45.14 (130)
11 to 15	9.23 (18)	15.28 (44)
16 to 20	3.59 (7)	7.64 (22)
21 to 25	0.51 (1)	2.08 (6)
26 to 30	0.51 (1)	0.35 (1)
30 to 60	1.02 (2)	0.35 (1)
Total	**100 (195)**	**100 (195)**

Source: Sample survey, 2013

TABLE 4.4. WORKER'S ASSESSMENT OF THEIR WORKLOAD IN THEIR LAST OR CURRENT JOB

Assessment of workload	Kerala	AP
Very heavy	39.21 (80)	20.47 (61)
Heavy	19.12 (39)	45.30 (135)
Normal	27.94 (57)	25.17 (75)
Moderate	5.39 (11)	9.06 (27)
light	8.33 (17)	0 (0)
Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**

Source: Sample survey, 2013

workload and it could be that women from AP were more willing to shoulder heavy workloads. However, it is revealing about 40 per cent of women from both states reported that their workloads had been normal, moderate or light, where normal referred to an expected workload; moderate and light to less than expected workloads.

A segment of Arab households employed multiple domestic workers. For instance, Preethi (her narrative was discussed in Chapter 3) was employed in a household with nine other domestic workers, comprising five Telugu-speaking women (three from East Godavari and two from West Godavari) and four women from the Philippines. In some instances, respondents referred to the households of parents and married children occupying separate households, for instance at different levels of the same building, but sharing some activities. In some of these households, cooking was undertaken jointly, but domestic workers could be called upon to work for more than one household.

4.4 Migration intermediaries

Migration intermediaries are a heterogeneous group, but the intermediation of the migration of women as domestic workers is in certain ways distinct and different from that of other categories of workers. Intermediaries who reached out to MWDWs were mostly unauthorized, working either independently or as sub-agents for recruitment agencies of uncertain legal status. Workers referred to this category of intermediaries as travel agents, or merely agents, and sometimes used kinship terms like *annan* (brother) indicating a sense of closeness.

The Emigration Act, 1983 had a watershed effect on the recruitment of MWDWs from India.[117]

117 The substantial gap between policy and the way recruitment occurs on the ground has often been pointed out (Sasikumar and Hussain, 2008; Breeding, 2010, 2017; Juredini, 2017; Rajan et al.. 2011). The licensing of recruitment agencies involves bureaucratic procedures and financial costs that actually reduced the scope for bringing them within the fold of regulation. Notably, the

The Act required all recruitment agencies to be registered with the POE and prohibited recruitment by sub-agents/commission agents. Registration was granted on the basis of several criteria that included financial soundness, adequacy of premises, and experience and payment of a substantial amount as a security deposit.[118]

In a single stroke, the Act of 1983 redefined a network of intermediaries who were actively involved in recruitment of MWDWs, including but not limited to those it refers to as sub-agents/commission agents, as illegal. Registered recruitment agencies were mostly located in the metros and big towns, and did not have the necessary outreach to mobilize recruits from the sending villages on their own. They had little incentive to either dispense with the services of commission agents or to employ them on a full-time basis. The former could prove costly because, as already pointed out, registered agents in the metros did not have the outreach in the source regions and the latter could be expensive compared to compensation on the basis of a commission, which could prove to be expensive.

Another issue is that small operators who possessed expertise in recruitment from the source areas may have preferred not to register because it was possible for them to continue to recruit workers and they could keep out of the radar of the state. Another feature of the Act that encouraged irregular practices was that the services charges for low-skilled workers were kept at an unreasonably low rate of INR2,000 per recruit. About a decade ago, it was increased to INR20,000 and in 2017, the MEA amended the emigration rules of 1983 to increase the service charges to INR30,000.[119]

The representative of a registered recruitment agency in a Kadapa town claimed that the agency had stopped recruiting MWDWs in the 1980s. However, other respondents in the town claimed that this agency had continued to recruit MWDWs, and actually charged a premium from its recruits leveraging its registered stature. Women migrants from the region also mentioned the name of this agency among those that had provided them visas and arranged their travel. The key point is that it is difficult to pin responsibility on recruiters when they operate unofficially. Thus, the failure of the law to recognize and regulate smaller intermediaries may have generated wider disincentives for recruitment in legally binding ways or, in other words, undermined recruitment through regular channels.

Public sector agencies had maintained a studied distance from the recruitment of MWDWs until the MEA entrusted the recruitment of this segment of workers exclusively to six of these agencies in August 2016. Officials of these agencies have repeatedly expressed the view that women domestic workers were unfit for migration because they were either driven by illicit opportunities to make money or too weak to cope with overseas employment.[120]

In 2013, one of the more prevalent modes of recruitment in the source regions of AP and Kerala was through "travel agencies". Recruiters operating under the banner of travel agencies supplied visas to aspirants who approached them, or migrant women were approached by itinerant brokers who worked with travel agencies in cities or towns. Women, who were contacted by itinerant agents, described visiting the offices of travel agencies to complete the documentation process. Typically, women migrants in some of the source areas in Kerala said that just about any travel agency in their locality could be approached for a visa. From their descriptions, it was apparent that travel agents obtained visas from recruitment agencies in the destination country and less frequently through direct connections with employers in the destination. As Table 4.5 shows, travel agents in small towns also received visas from bigger recruitment agencies located in the bigger cities of Kerala and AP and also from metros such as Bombay. Most of travel agents involved

Emigration Bill of 2019 seeks to bring sub-agents within the regulatory framework though, of course, this may not apply to domestic workers.

118 For details, see Sasikumar and Hussain, 2008.

119 MEA, 2017. NoZ-11025/279/2009 – Emig., Office Memorandum dated 15 December, MEA, Government of India

120 Kodoth 2019; Walton-Roberts, 2012.

TABLE 4.5. TYPOLOGY OF INTERMEDIARIES

	Type of intermediary	Mode of recruitment	Extent of recruitment
1	Licensed recruitment agencies located in the metros and in the sending regions which obtain visas directly from manpower recruitment agencies in the destination country	Approached by clients; mobilize clients through travel agencies/sub-agents in the source regions	Reported by migrants who obtained visas in the 1980s and 1990s, and less frequently since 2000
2	Authorized public sector agencies that recruit on the basis of direct demand from employers since 2016 and organized recruitment by NORKA, OMCAP and TOMCOM	Demand registered through the eMigrate website	NORKA has recruited about 350 women; OMCAP has recruited more than 400 women; TOMCOM started recruitment with five women
3	Local travel agencies which obtain visas directly from recruitment agencies in the destination country, from licensed agencies in Mumbai or directly from employers in the destination	Approached by clients; mobilize clients through sub-agents	Frequently reported by women who migrated in the 1990s and later
4	Dubious informal recruiting networks operating independently from makeshift offices on both sides of the border	Mobilize clients directly	Reported by a section of women who went since 2000
5	Dubious informal networks operating independently that recruit women for sex work	Mobilize clients directly	Reported by a small number of women who went since 2000
6	Individuals including migrant domestic workers in the destination who obtain visas directly from employers or from intermediaries	Mobilize clients directly	Reported by women across decades

in recruitment of MWDWs had experience of working in the Middle East.[121]

Before regulations became more stringent in the early 2000s, MWDWs were recruited also through a process that was familiar to other migrant workers. Advertisements were issued in newspapers and selection was based on personal interviews. In 1993, Sherin learnt that an agency was recruiting women for domestic work in Kuwait and gave an interview in Ernakulum. She was one of six candidates selected from about 20 women who appeared for the interview. She was placed with a household in Kuwait and worked there for 12 years.

Notably, migrant women from AP used the terms "office visas" and "agent visas" to refer to the manner in which they had been recruited. Irrespective of who recruited them at the source, "office" visas seemed to refer to visas supplied by recruitment agencies, perhaps registered ones, in the destination that observed mandatory processes in the placement of workers. Women would explain that agents and/or sponsors met them at the airport and took them to the office of the recruitment agency where they completed the formalities of sponsorship and went to their workplaces with their respective sponsors. In cases where the sponsors were not identified ahead of arrival, migrants waited at the accommodation provided by the recruitment agency until a sponsor was identified. This could take anywhere from a few days to a couple of months.[122] Women described large recruitment agencies owned by Arab nationals with Telugu and Malayalam-speaking staff as well as Filipinas and others. There were instances of women being deputed to work in the homes of the owners of recruitment agencies for brief periods before a sponsor was identified. "Agent" visas, on the other hand, seemed to refer to visas sourced through independent agents or small recruiting networks operating through direct links fostered with employers in the destination. Workers spoke of makeshift offices that doubled up as residences and were staffed by the agents themselves.

Brokers from Kadapa had travelled to East Godavari and worked with local brokers there to recruit women and with travel agencies in Kerala to organize the travel of women recruits. Gopal, who worked from Kuwait as a recruiter, was from a village in East Godavari and had connections in his home region as well as in other parts of AP. There is a reference in Section 3.1 to how Gopal

121 Interviews with travel agents in all the field sites.

122 Sponsors and workers could seek a change, but workers may be prevented from seeking a change if their recruitment agent was not sympathetic to their demands.

had migrated as a boy to Bombay and made his way from there to the Middle East in the 1970s. In Kuwait, Gopal held the visa of a house driver, but operated as a recruiter with the knowledge of his sponsor. The more recent experiences of women migrants suggest that networks of brokers could include a mix of people from Kerala and AP. Reetha was recruited by a pastor from her village in the highlands of Trivandrum district, but when she arrived in Kuwait, she was received at the airport by a Telugu-speaking woman, who was part of a recruiting network that seemed to operate in both AP and Kerala.

Women who had migrated more than once, each time on a new visa, had relied on local agents despite varied previous experiences. Flory, a woman in her early 50s, from East Godavari, had obtained visas from local brokers half a dozen times between 1985 and 2012 with varied results. She was forced to quit a stable job in Kuwait after five years because of her husband's ill health. Subsequently, she decided to migrate again because of financial difficulties at home. The fact that she had one good experience (in the job in Kuwait) prompted her to avail visas through local agents time and again.

In 2010, Flory spent three months in Saudi Arabia but was unable to cope with the workload of that job and returned with the help of the Indian embassy. In 2012, she obtained a visa to the UAE and was taken to an office-cum-residence on the border between Al Ain and Oman operated by a Telugu woman. After an unsuccessful attempt to place her with a household in the UAE, Flory waited in the office for two months. Flory says the agent left the country quite abruptly at this time, leaving her in the lurch. Under pressure, she agreed to go to work for a sponsor in Oman. Flory described a large number of such "offices" in the border area which catered to the demand from sponsors in Oman.

Typically, the ways in which informal recruiting networks operate spells trouble for MWDWs. These networks are known to use deception and subterfuge to persuade workers to take up their offers of overseas jobs and to proactively facilitate their emigration. When a recruit is short of money, the informal recruiting networks would agree to pay her costs on a verbal agreement that she could repay the amount from her salary. Some of the women who had been recruited by such networks described how their agents had taken custody of their travel documents and handed them over only at the airport immediately before their departure. This prevented women from scrutinising their visas for their validity and taking the precaution of entrusting copies of these documents to their families.

Once the women were in the destination country, the attitude of the recruiters from these networks could change dramatically. There were instances of women who had been coerced and even subjected to physical violence by agents from these informal networks to force them to stay on in jobs with abusive employers. When Bharati, who was from East Godavari, was not paid her salary for several months in a job in Oman, her sponsor told her, to her shock, that she had paid Bharati's recruiter an advance amounting to an entire year's salary. The profits of these recruiting networks depend on migrant workers remaining in employment with their sponsor. When a migrant worker insists on going home within the first three months, her recruitment agency must pay the costs of her travel. This legal requirement provides incentive to the unscrupulous recruiting networks to use force and try to compel MWDWs to remain in employment, even when sponsors are abusive. Respondent MWDWs spoke of how they had fled from their sponsor's home under severe pressure when they were not paid their salaries or subjected to violence and had sought refuge at the Indian embassy. Unfortunately, such recruiting networks have rarely been held to account for their actions.

Under the guise of recruiting women for domestic work, informal networks also recruit them for sex work. Two respondents revealed that they had close encounters with such networks, when they were recruited by women from their own villages and sent to Dubai. One respondent managed to escape because the police raided the residence where she was staying on her very first night there. The second respondent overheard conversations between two of the intermediaries, which made it clear to her that they were preparing to channel her into sex work. She got away with the help of an acquaintance in Dubai.

Women's narratives provide a window into the activities of recruitment agencies based on women's own experiences, but there is ample room for caution while categorizing recruitment agencies on this basis. In addition, regulatory

conditions do not encourage recruiters in the source contexts to speak openly about their operations. The intermediaries who spoke openly had been contacted through people who knew them well. The following account is an attempt to place information about recruiters in the destination country in perspective. It is not an attempt to provide a typology. Indeed, the limitations of fieldwork carried out only at the source do not permit us to venture into attempting to provide a typology of intermediaries at the destination.

Registered recruitment agencies in the destination country may be operated entirely by people from the source regions. Prabha, a woman from an East Godavari town, had operated a recruitment agency in Bahrain for two years along with her husband.[123]

> An Arab lady, an advocate ... was our friend. She asked my husband and me to do this business of manpower supply as we are Indian, and we know the people and the language. She said she would take 60 per cent as a commission and give us 40 per cent. The license [to operate the recruitment agency] was in the name of another Arab lady she appointed. My husband and I did all the work. This lady [in whose name the license was taken] used to come to the office.

Before this, Prabha had worked as a domestic worker in Bahrain. She migrated there for the first time when she was only 18 years old after her marriage broke down. She was married at the tender age of 14 years and was deeply unhappy when her marriage broke down. Her mother, who was a migrant domestic worker in Bahrain at the time, obtained a visa for her. She remarried later and became a recruiter herself. She then provided visas for her mother and her younger sister to go to Bahrain. Prabha said she used to recruit migrant workers through a network of about 20 agents in AP.

> Agents would get my number and contact me saying they had people who wanted to come there to work. I would talk to those people. I would not send money to the agent at once. After a few calls, I would ask them to send the person first. I would then do the process of checking, to confirm that the person they sent is the correct one [who she had agreed to recruit]. And only then would I send money to the agent. Once I developed trust in an agent, then I would send money before the person arrived.

She closed the office and returned home in December 2017 after she became pregnant. Prabha's second marriage was to a man of her own choosing, someone she had met when she was in East Godavari on a vacation from Bahrain. She operated the recruitment agency along with her second husband.

Women in East Godavari had also reached out directly to recruitment agencies in the destination countries. In 2014, a woman named Dhanlakshmi from East Godavari obtained a job in Kuwait by directly from a recruitment agency in that country. This was after she had returned home after working in Kuwait for a year because her father was very ill. Her father died and she did not want to go back to her previous employer, so she contacted the recruitment agent in Kuwait.

> I got the phone number of the agency office in Kuwait, so I called and asked about the opportunities there. He [the agent] asked me to meet his parents [who lived in Kakinada in East Godavari] and said that his mother knows an agent who would take care of my medical and other expenses and send me.

Domestic workers, especially those who work on free visas, may develop sufficient connections in the destination to obtain visas at least on a small scale for sale in their home regions. Sita, who is from East Godavari, was employed as a domestic worker in Oman on a free visa and had two decades of experience in the Middle East. Towards the end of an extended conversation, she inquired whether we (the author was accompanied by a local woman) knew of any women who would be interested in obtaining visas to work as domestic workers in Oman.[124] Sita pointed out that a visa would cost INR30,000 and that the recruit would have to "do her own emigration", which meant that the amount paid to Sita would not be spent on emigration and travel expenses.

123 Interview, East Godavari, June 2019.

124 Interview, East Godavari, 2013. Sita had worked previously in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Workers' narratives indicate that travel agencies and bigger recruitment agencies in India recruit workers mostly for registered recruitment agencies in the Middle East or directly for employers. Registered recruitment agencies in the Middle East may have a wider clientele base and mechanisms in place to mediate workers complaints. Workers' accounts suggest that the worst offenders were the numerous small informal recruiting networks that mobilize candidates from their home regions and supply them to the lowest segment of the market in the Middle East. Several of the MWDWs who had difficult experiences had migrated through such networks of local people operating on both sides of the border.

Informal networks have at best a tenuous base in the destination. They avoid investing in overheads and hence have high stakes in preventing delay in placing women with employers. Operating out of what appeared to be makeshift offices at the source and destination and with their profits contingent upon workers remaining in employment with sponsors, informal networks were unsympathetic to complaints from workers. They sought to force women to submit to highly exploitative conditions of work and were complicit with abusive employers. This category of recruiters operated independently, and while it is highly unlikely that they operated with a recruitment license in the Middle East, they were remarkably fluid and had a disconcerting ability to disappear in the face of trouble.

4.5 The nature of intermediation

Intermediaries are believed to extort money and to be instrumental in the exploitation and abuse of migrant women. Until recently, it was common for recruiters to charge MWDWs anywhere between INR30,000 and INR70,000 for emigration expenses, but women were willing to overlook this if they were placed in overseas jobs in circumstances they could manage and/or their recruiters were supportive of them in the destination. However, public discourse in India sees the abuse of MWDWs through a prism of national shame and honour, and demonises migration intermediaries who are then targeted by the state through restrictions on their activities but rarely ever actually punished for extortion or other crime. In addition, a protectionist emigration policy has generated a complex nexus between women aspirants and private intermediaries and encouraged irregular recruitment. Table 4.6 shows that most women migrants (83 per cent in Kerala and 89 per cent in AP) had used the services of brokers at one time or another in their migration careers.

The nature of brokerage calls into question a distinction that is often made between social networks and commercial recruiters. Social networks refer loosely to a vast assemblage of relationships and connections that people are able to harness for whatever purpose, which evoke a sense of familiarity, closeness and comfort. By contrast, commercial recruitment is expected to be impersonal, distant and motivated by profit. Given this understanding, it is also expected that social networks are benign unlike commercial recruitment. Table 4.7 shows that about half the women in the sample sourced their first visas from recruiting agents, whereas 25 per cent of women from Kerala and 34 per cent of women from AP sourced their first visas through social networks by paying a commission. Only 25 per cent of women from Kerala and 15 per cent from AP sourced their first visa without a monetary exchange.

Narratives of MWDWs show that visas sourced through social networks are, to varying extents, commercial transactions. On her first overseas trip in 1988 at the age of 21, Annie, cited in Section 4.3, said she paid for a visa sourced from a woman friend working in Kuwait. "I paid the money to the agent here. She [her friend in Kuwait] took the money. She did not want me to know about it."[125] Further, commercial recruitment, far from being impersonal, was a process that could lead to the development of close ties as brokers provided close-knit, personalized assistance and kept in touch with migrants. As Table 4.6 shows, over half of the women migrants in the sample, who had been assisted by intermediaries, said they had known the location of the latter's houses, which indicates a greater degree of familiarity.

The extent of reliance on intermediaries changes in significant ways for women on their subsequent journeys. Table 4.6 shows that 25 per cent of women from Kerala and 40 per

125 Interview, coastal village, Trivandrum, 2013

TABLE 4.6. RELIANCE ON RECRUITERS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEM

		Kerala	AP
Women who had used the services of an agent		83.8 (171)	88.9 (265)
Women who were accompanied to the airport by their agents or person designated by the agent at any time		81.87 (140)	75.85 (201)
Women who knew the location of their recruiter's house		58.48 (100)	67.92 (180)
Source of visa obtained for first overseas job	Agent	49.02 (100)	48.65 (145)
	Social network for a fee	25 (51)	34.23 (102)
	Social network without fee	23.04 (47)	15.44 (47)
	Others	2.94 (6)	1.68 (5)
Sources of visas obtained for subsequent jobs (multiple responses)	Arranged by self	24.56 (39)	41.97 (106)
	Agent	51.42 (90)	46.09 (112)
	Social networks	36.57 (64)	32.51 (80)
	Total	100 (175)	100 (243)
	Respondents who relied solely on agents	40.54 (83)	30.04 (90)

Source: Sample survey, 2013

cent of women from AP had arranged their own visas on subsequent journeys. Notably, the reliance on social networks for visas actually declines on subsequent journeys as women either arrange their own visas or depend on recruiters. Further, the proportion of women who relied solely on recruiting agents to obtain visas for subsequent journeys declines in both states but more sharply in AP than in Kerala.

The irregularities associated with women's migration in the ECR category necessitated close-knit and personalized assistance. Three-quarters of women who had been assisted by recruiting agents said that on their first journey, their agents or someone deputed by him/her had accompanied them to the airport (Table 4.6). It was a common practice for intermediaries to wait outside an airport to assist women recruits if the need arose. When there was a problem and women were not permitted to leave from a specific airport by the authorities, intermediaries had found another airport to send them from within a matter of days.

In 2007, airport officials in Hyderabad detained a woman from East Godavari whose passport was found to have been forged. Her agent, who was waiting outside the airport, was also taken into custody.[126] The case was tried in court, and the agent was found not guilty as the woman testified in his favour. The agent paid for all the expenses this woman incurred on the trial.

Intermediaries could be contacted with breathtaking ease in the villages of the source regions. For example, Mumtaz was less than 15 years old when she decided to migrate. Coming from a village in interior Kadapa, she said her parents were too poor to get her married. "People who came to my house told me to go out [a reference to the Middle East], work and get married. They used to tell me about an agent, that if you pay INR30,000, he will send you." She contacted an agent in a nearby town and made arrangements to leave for Bombay in 2001 with his assistance. The agent accompanied a group of about 15 women aspirants to Bombay, where he arranged accommodation for them as they waited to obtain visas and the papers required for the journey. Mumtaz waited for a month before leaving for Kuwait. "It all depends on luck, only those who get the visa can go," she said.

Information that circulated in their own localities also enabled aspirants to contact suppliers with ease. People who were in the "visa business," as women referred to the different tiers of intermediaries, disseminated information through local people, who, in the course of their everyday lives, were likely to meet many other people. Women often learnt about the availability

126 Kodoth (2016).

of visas through local traders, shopkeepers or drivers.

Aruna, cited in Chapter 3, explained how she had obtained a visa to Kuwait in 2008. "A *kaka* [reference to a Muslim man] in our locality had this business. A driver who lived close to the kaka's house got me the visa. I paid INR40,000 for the visa. They shared the commission." Aruna said the broker in question (the *kaka*) had obtained visas from a recruitment agency in Kuwait. When she arrived in Kuwait, a lady from the recruitment agency was waiting for her at the airport. "A lady came to the airport and took me to the [agency] office. The place I went to had two rooms and a kitchen. There was another room where they [the staff] lived. That night at 12 a.m., a madam came and took me home".

At the time of the interview, in May 2019, Aruna was employed by a family in Saudi Arabia. She obtained the job in September 2016 with the help of Moidu, a local intermediary, who she learnt about from people who lived close to her house. Aruna explained that Moidu operated on behalf of Altaf, who had a visa business in Riyadh. To equip her with the necessary documents, Moidu's son and her husband had accompanied her from Kollam, where she lived, to Trivandrum. After having a medical test conducted, they went to Altaf's travel agency in Trivandrum and submitted her passport, which had to be sent to Bombay for the visa to be stamped. Subsequently, Altaf visited her house in Kollam with Moidu and another person to hand over her ticket.

As migrant women and their families depend on intermediaries to mobilize documents and to arrange their journeys, the process generates both closeness and distinct tensions. Aruna's description of her experience reveals how the process of recruitment creates space to foster close personal ties between migrant women and intermediaries, and it also illustrates how brokers may overstep acceptable boundaries of personal conduct.[127]

Altaf's remarks were often sexually coloured. Aruna expressed her resentment but he continued to speak to her in this way.

> Altaf was a bad person. His behaviour with women was not correct. When I spoke to him, I got the feeling that he was an older man. I think Moidu Kaka knew the kind of person he was, so he told me not to give him my photograph. On the phone, Altaf spoke in a bad way with me. He had come to Kerala to send people at the time. He said he will pay all my costs. He told me not to tell Moidu Kaka. "I will give you INR5,000 for all expenses. I will even pay for your underwear." When he said that, I told him that I had worked abroad before, and I knew about these things. I was very firm. I told him to behave himself. I said I have a husband. I do not need him.

Aruna's reference to her husband is evocative of the social context in Kerala. It signals that she is a "good woman" and that she lives within the normative framework of marital protection. However, it did not have the desired effect on Altaf, who made light of her displeasure. This exchange occurred when he visited Aruna's house to hand over her ticket.

> Then too he acted as if he was very concerned about me. He was an older man. I am young enough to be his daughter. I told him, "I have been calling you *kaka* (brother) when I should be calling you *mama* (uncle)." He said I should call him kaka. Then I was curt with him. He said, "You have a sharp tongue." They gave me the ticket and left, they did not even stay to have tea.

But Aruna was forced seek his assistance again when her employer in Saudi Arabia told her that they would pay her only SAR1,200 instead of the SAR1,300 that she had been offered. "I called Altaf to tell him about this. He said he would come to Saudi in ten days and then he would come to see my employer … It was not yet a month he said. He came and spoke to my employer and I was paid SAR 1,300."

MWDWs and migration intermediaries are bound together by shared interests. But because MWDWs negotiate with intermediaries on a fraught terrain and depend on them to sort out their problems, they may be compelled to tolerate offensive behaviour. Women also learn to accommodate deception by intermediaries in the course of their migration. Dhanlakshmi learnt that her agent had siphoned off the money her sponsor had paid for her recruitment and travel

127 Interviewed on the telephone from Saudi Arabia, May 2019

expenses a month after she was placed in her first overseas job in Dubai 2007.

> I did not know that the sponsor had paid for my ticket and visa. The intermediary took INR35,000 from me. After going there, when I was to be paid my first salary, the agent came to the house. Then my employer said, "Dhanlakshmi, we paid for the ticket, medical and visa to get you here. Tell us whether you want to continue working here or not." The woman who helped me to go there said, "Dhanlakshmi, don't tell Madam that you paid me money. If she learns the truth, she will not allow me to enter this house."

However, workers continue to pay for the expenses of migration even when they are aware of the provision because they do not know of any other way to go overseas. Further, recruiters may be the only refuge for women who have difficulties with their employers in the destination. Mumtaz, for instance, had turned to her recruitment agent, who was her only personal connection in Kuwait, to find her another job when her employer in Kuwait discontinued her services after six months.

> My *Kafeel* [sponsor in Arabic] was not good, he did not pay my salary for six months. After the war in Kuwait, people from outside were asked to leave the country. I asked my *Kafeel* to send me back, to give me a ticket. I said I can't do this work anymore. He said, I didn't bring you here and he took me to the office and left me there ... I was there in the office for two or three months. Then what could I do? I pleaded with the office staff. I told them that I came from a poor family, my parents are poor, and we live in a rented house. I did not get my salary even though I worked for six months, and now I have stayed in the office for two months without any work. I have been here for eight months and have earned nothing. I said please find me another house to work in. Then they placed me in another house. It was an Indian house, people from Kerala. I worked there for one year. They paid me 30 dinars ... I came back through the embassy.

In grave situations, recruiting agents have extended essential support to recruits. When a severely abused Majida escaped from her employer's house in Kuwait, the employer had insisted that the recruiting agent send her back. She recalled watching the recruiting agent raise his voice on the phone and argue with the employer. When this happened in 1995, Majida was only 18 years old. She was so traumatized that she was not able to cope in three households that she was placed in subsequently. Eventually, her recruiting agent placed her in a household where she continued to work for the next 13 years. At the time, Majida had close relatives working in Kuwait. But when she fled from her first employer's house with severe injuries after being assaulted, her maternal aunt did not take her home but took her instead to the recruitment agency. Employers may also file cases against runaway domestic workers on trumped up charges such as stealing, and recruitment agencies are better able to deal with workers in such situations.

But migrant women's dependence on intermediaries is the cause of some of their vulnerability. To gain control over aspirants, unscrupulous intermediaries in the source regions suppress information and instil fear in them. Aspirants are made to believe that their plans will fail if they reveal any information about these plans.[128] Women experiencing harassment and abuse by both employers and recruiting agents prefer to be silent to avoid shame and shield themselves from harsh social comments. This generates an opaque environment where aspirants suffer from information asymmetry and are unable to differentiate between an unscrupulous broker and a credible one. Some intermediaries, who were part of the small informal networks discussed in the previous section, had mobilized spatial ties to persuade women to take up gruelling overseas jobs and had been complicit with abusive employers. Some of these networks recruited workers in a clandestine way.

Bharati from East Godavari and Reetha from Trivandrum were recruited in 2012 and 2015 respectively by local pastors who sought them

128 Discussion with returnee domestic workers who had been organised by SEWA in a highland village in the Trivandrum district. In interviews after the group discussion, workers also spoke about their personal experiences. Sister Sally, the representative of the National Domestic Workers Forum (NDWF) in Trivandrum also noted that prospective emigrants are difficult to find because of the secrecy that is maintained about the issue.

out, gained their confidence and played on their anxieties to persuade them to conceal their plans. Both women hid their plans from even their close family members until all the paperwork was complete. Both of them faced problems with their employers, at which time, their agents in the destination country turned hostile and abusive.

Bharati's employer was violent, and in the first instance her agent got her a new job, but when she had trouble adjusting in the second job as well and told her agent that she wanted to return home, the agent resorted to violence to force her to remain in her job. In distress, Bharati escaped to a shelter, which she had learnt about from another worker. In the process, she lost all her documents and was repatriated with the help of activists, who obtained the documents necessary to establish her identity with the Indian embassy. Reetha was cut off from her family for several months as her employer confined her to the house and deprived her of her phone. Her brother finally travelled to Kuwait and located her.

Another instance of how intermediaries preyed on socio-spatial ties to dupe aspirants into perilous situations was that of Satya, who was from Trivandrum city and was negotiating with a travel agency to obtain a hospital-cleaning visa in Oman. She was approached by an agent who was well-known in her neighbourhood, with an offer of a job in a household in Oman where his wife was employed at the time. Satya. On her arrival at the employer's house, she learnt that the sponsor had been unwilling to relieve the agent's wife until he provided a replacement. The agent's wife remained in the house for two months after Satya arrived, teaching her the job. As she was leaving the house, Satya says she cautioned her that things would be easier if she gave into the demands of the sponsor's four sons, who were between 10 and 16 years old.

Satya says her problems began soon after because she refused to comply with demands that she thought were excessive, including accommodating the boys in her room at night and to suffer them touching her inappropriately. Her appeals to her sponsor's wife went unheeded, even as the latter began to abuse her. Satya had objects and hot tea thrown at her, was burnt with a hot iron ladle and locked up without food or water for two days. She escaped with the help of a Malayali shopkeeper close to the house and returned home with the assistance of the Indian embassy.

Not surprisingly, migration brokers contested the view that they were key figures in the chain of exploitation of women migrants. They not only denied exploiting women migrants but also sought to discredit women as unreliable and promiscuous, subscribing to the very stereotypes of migrant women that have informed official policy. Characteristically, a group of travel agents in a Kadapa town caricatured women migrants in the following terms. According to these travel agents, women "run away" from employers because they want "freedom". Here, freedom referred to excess, i.e., women's purported desires to forge illicit ties and to secure better opportunities on the informal market. To emphasize their point, this group of agents contrasted the conservatism of Saudi Arabia, which they claimed was good for women, with the freedom that was available in Kuwait, which, according to them, "spoilt" women. Referring to Saudi Arabia, Abdullah, one of the travel agents, said:

> There the rules and regulations are perfect. Once the housemaid gets down in the airport, they don't see the outside world again till they finish their two or three years' contract ... In Saudi, they don't allow women out and don't allow them to go with anyone from outside. They don't allow them to come out of the gate or talk with anyone. They don't allow anyone to stand in front of their house.

In this account, women's confinement within the home is constituted as desirable, even as it masks the abuse women suffer within the home. The agents concurred that Kuwait was different. Women enjoyed a lot of freedom there, housemaids had holidays; they went to the park and met many people. The problem arose, according to one of the travel agents, because "[a]fter going there, our women want freedom. They get this in their mind – freedom – then all the problems begin. Then they break the law".[129] Abdullah explained that because they have

129 Domestic workers enjoy greater freedom in Kuwait; they have weekly holidays, when they come together to socialize in parks and may be seen interacting easily with men in churches (Weiner, 1984).

freedom, girls may be induced to run away by men, who wish to have illicit relations with them.

Prabha, who used to operate a recruitment agency in Bahrain, also voiced similar views. She claimed that women who seemed innocent, prior to recruitment, underwent a transformation when they arrived in the destination country.

> They want boyfriends, mobiles etc., they want to go out, demand holidays and they start laying down many new conditions. Once they are there, they become like the devil. I have personally experienced all this as I was running a manpower agency ... That is why I rarely send women now, only one or two each year. I send only women who I know personally, and I warn them to behave properly and not to create problems. At the same time, I also speak to the sponsor and tell them to treat the housemaid properly, to give them food regularly, the kind of food women are accustomed to. I say only if you agree to these conditions, I will send her.

Recruiters may vilify women migrants to deflect attention from their own culpability, but the tensions between recruiters, migrant women and sponsors are systemic. When a woman "runs away" from her sponsor's household, both her sponsor and her recruitment agent lose money and the effort they put into the recruitment process comes to naught. Some of the women respondents pointed out sponsors monitor their phone calls and restrict their mobility owing to heightened fears that workers may befriend men and run away.

In these fraught circumstances, informal intermediation was important in maintaining a balance in the relationship between employers and workers. Prabha learnt this the hard way after she left Bahrain. She had recruited her younger sister to work in a household, and after Prabha returned to East Godavari, her sister's sponsor shifted her sister to another employer who forcefully confined her, deprived her of food and prevented from communicating with her family. When Prabha called the sponsor, he threatened to harm her sister. Prabha was unable to contact her sister and she did not have her sister's new employer's number. This was a harrowing experience for her, though eventually, her sister was rescued and repatriated after Prabha filed a complaint with the MEA.

The analysis in Table 4.7 shows that women migrants depend heavily on recruiting agents, especially on their first journeys. While this underlines the key role played by recruiting agents in facilitating women's mobility, it is also important to note that MWDWs' dependence on recruiting agents reduces on subsequent journeys. There were also distinct patterns according to source states. Table 4.7 shows that twice as many women from AP depended mainly on agents for assistance with procedures on their first journey compared to women from Kerala. A higher proportion of women from Kerala received assistance from relatives and friends. It is apparent from the analysis that even when they arranged their own journeys, women from AP relied on agents to facilitate their journeys. An important reason for this could be that they are less resourceful than women from Kerala at negotiating government regulations on their own or with the help of their relatives.

TABLE 4.7. SOURCE OF ASSISTANCE FOR EMIGRATION

Source of visas and assistance	Categories	Kerala	AP
Main source of assistance with procedures for emigration for the first overseas journey	Self	4.9 (10)	2.7 (9)
	Relatives / friends	62.7 (128)	39.3 (118)
	Agent	25.0 (51)	57.0 (172)
	Others	7.4 (13)	0.0 (0)
Main source of assistance with procedures for emigration for subsequent journeys n Kerala 177, n AP 243	Arranged by self	31.25 (56)	34.57 (86)
	Relatives / friends	48.59 (86)	25.10 (61)
	Agent	20.33 (36)	48.56 (119)
	Total	**100 (177)**	**100 (243)**
	Respondents who relied solely on agents	19.77 (35)	41.96 (102)

Source: Sample survey, 2013

Though women from Kerala depended less on agents on their first journey, Table 4.7 shows that their dependence on agents did not reduce as much on subsequent journeys compared to women from AP. This is especially stark when we look at the proportions of women who depended solely on agents to obtain visas or for assistance with procedures in subsequent journeys (Table 4.6).

The reduced reliance by women from AP on recruiting agents on subsequent journeys as well as the higher proportion of women migrants from the state who arranged their own visas suggests that the migration of women from AP could be marginally more beneficial than it is for women from Kerala. Women from AP may have gained greater control over their own lives after they started migrating. Differences in this regard between women from Kerala and AP add substance to the analysis in Chapter 3, which showed that migration from AP had greater buoyancy and was more mainstream compared to Kerala. This aspect is explored further with reference to how migrant women finance their visas and their travel in the following section.

4.6 Cost and financing of migration

The expenses incurred by women for their first overseas journeys had increased over the decades in nominal terms. Women migrants did not fail to point out that INR10,000 was a huge amount in the 1980s and 1990s as compared to today. Table 4.8 shows that expenses have increased between the 1980s and the 2000s, shifting upwards in terms of expenditure classes. Table 4.8 also shows that migrant workers on their first overseas journeys rarely receive the benefit of legislation that requires sponsors to pay for emigration costs, as only a small proportion of them had incurred no expenses. When they did benefit, it was usually because close family members obtained visas for them directly from sponsors or less frequently when a recruitment agency observed the mandated legal procedures.

Table 4.8 reveals an arbitrariness in expenses incurred. On the one hand, a quarter of the women who went in the 1980s reported incurring expenses of over INR30,000. On the other, almost one-third of the women who started migrating between 2000 and 2009 had paid INR30,000 or less. Expenses ranged from anywhere between less than INR10,000 to upwards of INR100,000. Such variation is not unusual when there is a high degree of informality. Intermediaries were in a position to extract disproportionately large sums of money from migrants depending on the compulsions that migrants may feel to obtain overseas jobs. But brokers also incurred expenses on a range of activities including mobilizing women and arranging their documents and travel.

A chain of agents worked to ensure that women are transported to distant airports such as Chennai, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Nagpur, Pune and New Delhi, and made accommodation arrangements in these places. The profits of these intermediaries depended on what they received from the sponsor or the recruitment agency in the destination, but intermediaries also took risks. According to the travel agents we interviewed, if a migrant worker absconded in the first few days, the recruiter at the source would not be compensated for the money he may have invested.

TABLE 4.8. EXPENSES INCURRED BY MIGRANT WOMEN ON THEIR FIRST OVERSEAS JOURNEY

Expense incurred on emigration and travel (figures in INR)	Decade of journey for first overseas employment			
	1980–89	1990–99	2000–09	2010–13
No expense	5.7 (2)	3.8 (6)	6.9 (17)	18.6 (11)
Up to 10 000*	25.7 (9)	13.3 (21)	3.6 (9)	6.8 (4)
10 001– 30 000	42.8 (15)	42.4 (67)	24.6 (61)	22.1 (13)
30 000 – 50 000	25.7 (9)	30.4 (48)	41.9 (104)	37.3 (22)
50 001 and above	0 (0)	10.1 (16)	22.9 (57)	15.3 (9)
Total	**100 (35)**	**100 (158)**	**100 (248)**	**100 (59)**

Source: Sample survey, 2013
*The table does not include two women, one from Kerala and one from AP, who are part of the sample and who undertook their first journeys in 1979 and 1971 respectively. Their expenses did not exceed INR1,000.

TABLE 4.9. SOURCES OF FINANCE FOR WOMEN MIGRANTS ON THEIR FIRST AND SUBSEQUENT OVERSEAS JOURNEYS

	Source of finance	Kerala	AP
Source of finance on first overseas journey (multiple responses)	Informal loan	37.94 (85)	85.0 (272)
	Bank loan (mortgage)	18.30 (41)	4.06 (11)
	Borrowing from other sources	12.95 (28)	2.50 (8)
	Savings	4.91 (11)	4.06 (13)
	Sale of assets	11.16 (25)	4.38 (14)
	No expenses	14.73 (33)	0.63 (2)
	Total	**100 (204)**	**100 (298)**
Source of finance on subsequent journeys (multiple responses)	Informal loan	40.44 (72)	62.13 (153)
	Bank loan (mortgage)	13.44 (24)	1.23 (3)
	Borrowing from other sources	7.86 (14)	1.64 (4)
	Savings	21.35 (38)	29.22 (71)
	Sale of assets	6.74 (12)	1.65 (4)
	No expenses	21.91 (39)	27.16 (67)
	Total	**100 (178)**	**100 (243)**
	Loan exclusively from informal sources	33.7	40.74

Source: Sample survey, 2013

Women aspirants in AP and Kerala have been willing to pay large amounts of money to gain access to overseas jobs. For instance, Farzana, who is from a highland village in Malappuram, paid about INR150,000 to a travel agent in a bordering town in Tamil Nadu to migrate to Saudi Arabia in 2017.[130] Women from AP depended heavily on borrowings from moneylenders (informal credit) obtained at very high rates of interest to finance the expenses on their first journey, whereas women from Kerala were less dependent on informal credit as more of them were able access other sources of credit including bank loans and borrowing from other sources (relatives and friends). Also, on their first journey, a higher proportion of women from Kerala received the benefit of the legislation requiring sponsors to bear the expenses of emigration and travel.

Women from AP were clearly more disadvantaged than their counterparts from Kerala in terms of how they financed their first journeys, but there was a marked improvement in their position on subsequent overseas journeys (Table 4.9). Not only did they reduce their dependence on informal credit, but only 40 per cent of them depended solely on informal credit. What is clearly significant is that women were able to diversify their sources of finance. There was a significant increase in the proportion of women from both AP and Kerala who reported using their own savings to finance subsequent journeys, but the increase was greater for women from AP. The increase in women who reported that they did not incur any expenses on subsequent journeys was also greater in AP than Kerala.

This substantiates the analysis in Chapter 3 and in previous sections of this chapter that the marginal gains of women's migration could be greater in AP, which is marked by poorer social development and greater poverty. That the proportion of women from Kerala depending on informal credit sources to finance subsequent journeys actually increased between their first and later journeys, could reinforce the evidence in Chapter 3 of their greater marginalization within their own state. The effects of stigma may prevent women from Kerala, who do face relatively less severe financial constraints, from choosing to migrate. Therefore, women who migrate successively may do so because their

130 Interview, Malappuram, June 2019.

TABLE 4.10. WOMEN WHO RECEIVED SPECIFIC TYPES OF ASSISTANCE FROM INTERMEDIARIES

Type of assistance	Kerala	AP
To obtain emigration clearance	12.86 (22)	9.43 (25)
Medical and police clearance certificates	12.28 (21)	52.45 (139)
Travel through pushing	74.27 (127)	47.17 (125)
Travel arrangements without pushing	18.12 (31)	38.11 (101)
*Missing responses in Kerala 33, AP 33		

Source: Sample survey, 2013

circumstances either do not improve or because they experience downward mobility as their families hurtle from one crisis to another.

4.7 Mobility practices and the irrelevance of emigration clearance

The infringement of the rights of MWDWs through non-payment of salary or partial payment, excessive work and lack of rest, denial of adequate food or the confinement of the worker are by no means problems faced only, or even largely, by migrants in irregular employment. As elaborated in Section 4.1 and 4.2 above, MWDWs may, therefore, have little incentive to comply with legal procedures. Compounding this problem is the dissonance between women's perspectives and state regulations. Women see intermediaries as a crucial resource who offer assistance when they are in need and enable them to migrate, as opposed to government agencies which they see as obstructing their aspirations. Private intermediaries are also perceived by MWDWs as being effective in helping them obtain the necessary documentation and in enabling them to comply with emigration clearance procedures or to migrate by evading these procedures.

Practices enabling migrant women to evade legal requirements have been normalized in the sending regions. It is telling that the minimum age of 30 years for women in the ECR category who wish to migrate is flouted rampantly. The analysis in Chapter 3 above showed that nearly half of the women from AP who started migrating since the year 2000 and 30 per cent of women from Kerala in this category were below 30 years of age on their first overseas journey.

Table 4.10 shows that the most frequently reported service received from brokers was arranging overseas travel through "pushing". Referred to as *chavutikayattal* (push in with the feet) or *thallal* (push and shove) in Malayalam and by women from AP as "pushing", the service involves the payment of a bribe to the concerned officials at the airport to allow women who do not possess emigration clearance to pass through the emigration check at the airport. Almost three-quarters of the women from Kerala and half the women from AP revealed that intermediaries had assisted their travel using this irregular procedure. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was pointed out that emigration clearance had been obtained by bribing the POE or the staff in the POE's office, but digitization and online recruitment had put an end to this practice.[131]

A popular way to evade the minimum age requirement was to obtain passports showing a woman's age as 30 years. In East Godavari, two underage women migrants, who were eligible for ECNR passports, had obtained ECR passports. They had submitted that they were illiterate to avoid submitting their school-leaving certificates as proof of age, and they had obtained a certificate from the village authorities showing their age as 30 years. Both these women said this was done to avoid any difficulties that may arise later because they were underage. Nirmala had completed intermediate-level education and was 21 years old in 2008 when she migrated for the first time. Kamala also had migrated for the first time in 2008. She was only 18 years old at the time but was a trained health worker with an ANM qualification.

The practice of increasing the age of migrant women on their passports goes back to at

131 Interview with a travel agent in Trivandrum, 2013. There were several cases in court that implicated the POE as well as recruitment agents, see discussion in Rajan et al. (2011).

least the 1980s. Women from Trivandrum who migrated in the early eighties said that at the time, Saudi Arabia mandated a minimum age of 35 years for MWDWs to migrate. Kantavalli, who is from East Godavari, migrated for the first time in 1989, and she said, "My original date of birth is in 1963, not in 1955. Ten years was added to my age on the passport because I was too young at the time".[132]

However, compliance with the minimum age alone may not suffice if women did not have other necessary documents like a valid work contract. In an interview, Kantavalli, who is from East Godavari, said she was sent through pushing from Bombay:

> How did you go to Bombay?
>
> Kantavalli: A man accompanied me.
>
> Who was he?
>
> Kantavalli: A person from the agency.
>
> How much did you spend?
>
> Kantavalli: I spent INR10,000 in those days.
>
> Did you pay for your visa?
>
> Kantavalli: I paid INR10,000 for the visa and also spent for the ticket. Together, I spent INR20,000.
>
> Did you have emigration clearance?
>
> Kantavalli: No, I did not have emigration [clearance]. I underwent the medical test and then I was sent by pushing. Subsequently, I went directly. I came home and stayed for five years when there was a war during the time of Saddam Hussain. After that, my old employer sent me a new visa. I did not pay anything.

At the time of her first journey in 1999, Mumtaz, whose narrative is discussed in sections 4.4 and 4.5, was a little under 15 years. She went through pushing in 1999 and again in 2010, even though her age had been altered on her passport to comply with the minimum age. When a woman under 30 had her actual age in her passport, intermediaries had devised ways of altering the age. Fauzia, whose narrative was discussed in section 4.1 above, obtained a job in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s, and she travelled there using the passport of another woman because her own passport showed her age as 24 years, which was below the 35 years required for a visa to Saudi Arabia. Fauzia said a technique called *thala vettal* (cutting off the head) was employed to replace the face of the woman in the photograph with her face to make it appear as if it was her passport.[133]

As Table 4.10 indicates, pushing was used quite frequently to evade emigration clearance. Abdullah, the travel agent in a Kadapa town who narrative was discussed in section 4.5, explained how pushing was operationalized. In October 2013, during a discussion with a group of travel agents in his office,[134] Abdullah pointed out that pushing works like a chain. Emigration officials are identified through the agents' network and the passport details of candidates are passed on to them and then money changes hands. "There are many high-profile people involved in this pushing for illegal income." The travel agents said high-ranking officials were involved.

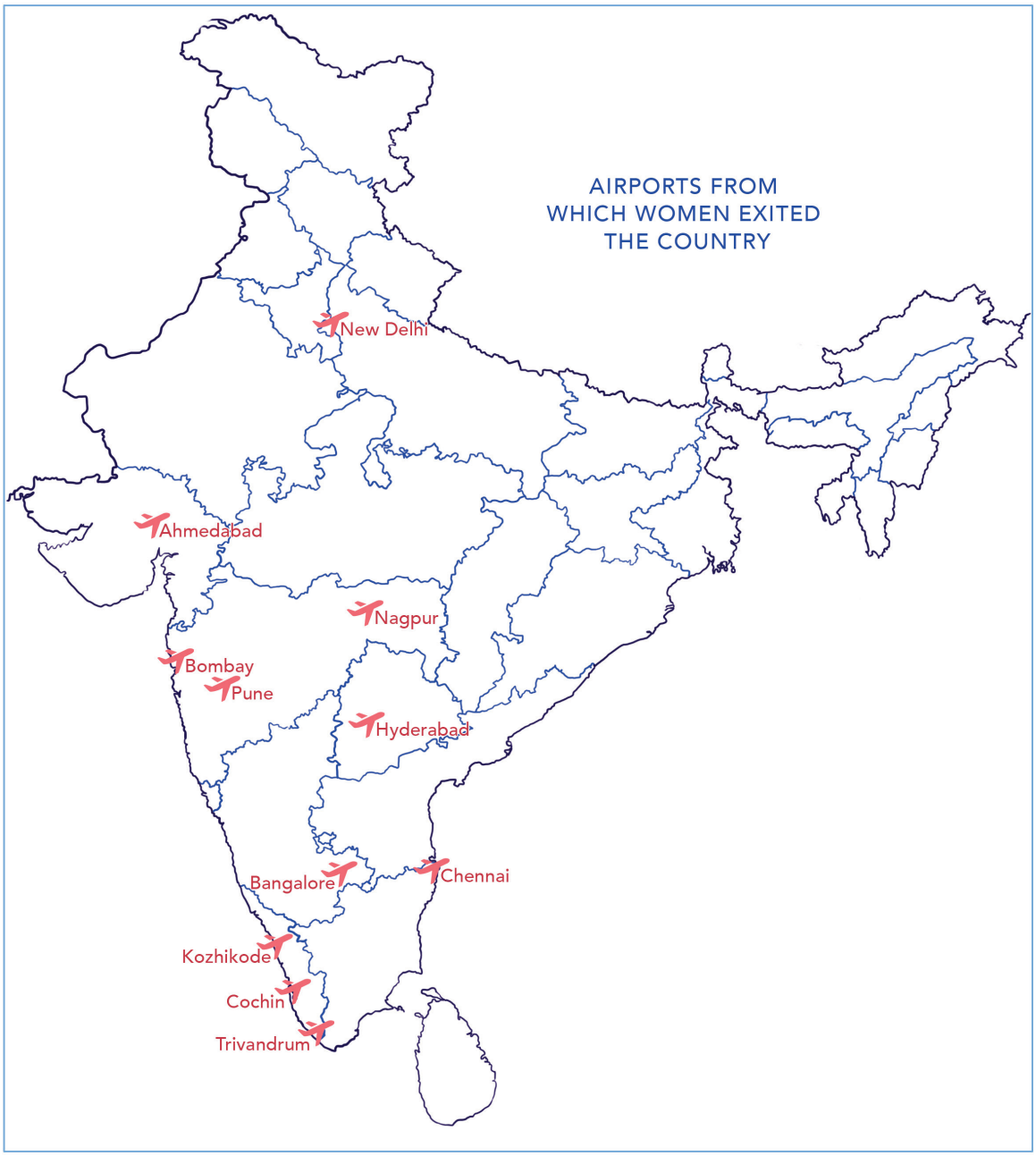
At the time of the discussion in October 2013, according to the travel agents in the room, pushing was being operated from Delhi, Pune and Lucknow. Abdullah pointed out that three days prior to the interview, there had been some changes as a result of which Hyderabad was "closed" for pushing. "When an officer comes from outside, the existing officer will get scared and stops doing this work. He tells us not to send the persons for pushing as it has been stopped. Then we look at other options like Delhi."

Agents source information from the official who "sets up" pushing. Vasanta, a broker based in her home village in East Godavari, said that she had accompanied her clients to airports across the country, "Hyderabad, Madras, Delhi, Kerala, Bangalore, etc., wherever the flight is from. The 'setting' person asks us to go, saying he is in an airport in Kerala, then we take all the candidates and go there. For example, I will take four persons, another agent will get four persons. In this manner, several agents take their candidates and we go together to the airport." Vasanta had worked overseas for a sponsor who

132 Interview, East Godavari, June 2019.

133 Interview in June 2019. Fauzia started working overseas in 1980 and returned only in 2018. She came back to nurse her sister who was critically ill.

134 Conversation with a group of brokers at a travel agency in a Kadapa town in October 2013.



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance of it by the United Nations and ILO.

owned a recruitment agency, and she had helped with work at the agency. There, she had learnt about the process of recruitment and had also developed connections with recruiting networks and employers, which enabled her to work as a recruiter after she had returned home.

Brokers provide a range of services to equip women with the documentation required for migration. Table 4.7 shows that over half of the women from AP had also relied on brokers to assist them with the medical examination and police clearance. Apart from this, brokers had arranged travel for about 18 per cent of the women from Kerala and 38 per cent from AP in ways that did not include pushing.

Because of the historical ties binding Bombay with the source regions, brokers were closely networked with emigration officials in Bombay. This made it easier for them to make travel arrangements from Bombay airport, especially

TABLE 4.11: PORT OF DEPARTURE OF WOMEN EMIGRANTS

Port of departure for women emigrants according to journeys made in each decade				
	1980–89	1990–99	2000–09	2010–13
Mumbai	85.9 (55)	85.4 (334)	57.0 (573)	34.6 (113)
Trivandrum	12.5 (8)	7.9 (31)	12.2 (123)	16.5 (54
Hyderabad	1.6 (1)	1.5 (6)	9.3 (93)	15.6 (51)
Chennai	0	3.6 (14)	12.5 (126)	20.5 (67)
* These are only the airports that were used most frequently by workers. The total number of journeys undertaken by workers in the sample was 1,792. The remaining journeys were from other airports.				
Port of departure for women emigrants on first journey according to the decade in which it was made*				
Mumbai	85.7 (30)	81.6 (129)	24.6 (61)	8.5 (5)
Trivandrum	11.4 (4)	7.6 (12)	15.7 (39)	13.6 (8)
Hyderabad	2.9 (1)	1.9 (3)	18.5 (46)	22.0 (13)
Chennai	0	5.7 (9)	26.2 (65)	32.2 (19)
Kerala (others)	0	1.9 (3)	5.6 (14)	15.3 (9)
* The total number of first journeys is 502 but only the airports used most frequently by women are shown.				

Source: Sample survey, 2013

for women without emigration clearance. Table 4.11 shows the significance of Bombay as the port of departure from the country, even in the 1990s and 2000s, when there was no shortage of connectivity from airports that were closer to the source regions. The nearest airports for women from Kerala were Trivandrum, Kozhikode and Kochi, and for women from East Godavari, it was Hyderabad and for women from Kadapa, either Chennai or Bangalore. Trivandrum, Chennai and Hyderabad, which were a distant second, third and fourth, have grown in importance since 2000 as the port of departure for women migrants, especially those undertaking their first journey.

Table 4.11 also shows a sharp reduction since the year 2000 in the use of Bombay as the port of departure for women on their first overseas journey. This could be because of better monitoring at Bombay, which may have made intermediaries turn to other airports. In October 2013, travel agents interviewed in Kadapa said that pushing had been stopped from Bombay then. Women continued to leave from Bombay but more frequently on subsequent journeys. This may be either because it was easier to do so or because it was cheaper for them to travel to the city by train and take their flights from there than to fly directly from the source region. Tables 4.11 and 4.12 show that since 2000, there is a marked decline in the use of Bombay as the port of departure.

The analysis in Table 4.12 shows that about half the women in the sample had travelled overseas for the first time without the contact number of any person or organization in the destination country, and that no woman in the sample possessed the contact number of the Indian embassy or and Indian officials on her first journey is a serious lapse. It is perhaps these statistics, and not the overstated concern over migrant women's age that prevails among policymakers, which underscore the precarious nature of recruitment from India.

A few of the women had been misled about their destination, but it would be exaggerated to suggest that this is rampant. In these instances, recruiters may have vested interests in holding back this information. In 2015, Reetha, whose story was discussed in Section 4.5, had been misled by her pastor-agent into thinking she was going to Oman. She had a visa to Kuwait, as her brother discovered, when he checked her ticket just before her departure from Nagpur airport. Her agent had withheld her passport and ticket until that time. The agent accompanied them to Nagpur from where Reetha left for Kuwait. As she did not have emigration clearance, her agent had arranged for her to go through pushing. Half the women in the sample had migrated at some time or another without knowing the name of their employer (55 per cent in Kerala and 64 per cent in AP). But this is not surprising, especially

TABLE 4.12: THE PREPAREDNESS OF WOMEN MIGRANTS FOR OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT

Women's preparedness		Kerala	AP
Women who travelled without information about overseas jobs	Country of employment	6	1
	Name of employer	111	190
	Salary	93	103
Respondents who did not have a contact telephone number in the destination on their first overseas journey		59.3 (121)	43.3 (129)
Category of persons whose telephone numbers respondents possessed at the time of their first overseas journeys	Family/friends in the country	24.02 (49)	26.17 (78)
	Overseas recruiting agent	8.33 (17)	8.72 (26)
	Indian embassy or Indian official	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Employer	9.31 (19)	29.19 (87)

Source: Sample survey, 2013

when women are not directly recruited but by recruitment agencies in the destination country. A significant section of women also did not know the salary they were supposed to receive (46 per cent in Kerala and 35 per cent in AP).

Official and popular representations of MWDWs and aspiring women migrants suggest that they are naïve and hence, easy prey for unscrupulous intermediaries. However, MWDWs lack of preparedness is not merely the result of their low education levels or other individual characteristics. That none of the women possessed a contact number for the Indian embassy or of an Indian official in the destination country is a scathing comment on how poorly the Indian system of governance equips poorly educated women or women from lower socio-economic strata for overseas migration. This statistic speaks about an alarming failure of outreach on the part of the government.

Women's testimonies showed that a sizeable section of them had not even heard of the Indian embassy on their first journeys. Not a single woman in the sample had received pre-departure orientation, whatever its shortcomings. In the absence of governmental outreach and support, women learnt about the Indian embassy when their employers accompanied them there to renew their passports or from fellow workers. In some instances, workers who were in distress had learnt about the embassy from other workers and had used this information to escape their employers.

4.8 Conclusion

The analysis of sample survey data and migrant women's narratives shows that a protectionist policy has contributed to making the relationship between migrant women and intermediaries both vital and fraught. By fostering MWDWs, dependence on private intermediaries, the migration policy has spurred information asymmetry and increased their vulnerability in the process of migration as well as in overseas employment. India's migration policy has bolstered the ability of unscrupulous intermediaries to exploit women's aspirations and undermined women's ability to negotiate with recruiters and employers from a position of greater strength. Even when women comply with regulations, a protectionist policy has in practice increased the risks and reduced the benefits of migration for poorly qualified women.

There is no dispute about the need to create mechanisms for intervention when migrant women are abused by recruiters or by their employers. But a policy framework honed on sensational media reportage of abuse of women workers in the Middle East and the demands of a domestic public for restrictions based on patriarchal and nationalist sentiment has failed to address the concerns of migrant women. The analysis in this chapter shows that compared to their first journeys, women were better placed subsequently to obtain jobs and finance their journeys with less dependence on intermediaries. This shows that women migrants have been enterprising enough to improve their position, but also that they have done so despite an adverse framework of governance. Therefore, policy has in all probability compromised the prospects of MWDWs. This finding is an important corrective to the claims upon which India's migration policy is based.

5. Destinations

Until recently, the major destinations of Indian women were Kuwait and the UAE followed by Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. There has also been a consistent flow of women from specific source regions in Kerala and AP to Saudi Arabia. Women from Trivandrum had migrated to Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s but not since, and only one woman in the sample had travelled to Jordan, but she went there from Kuwait during the war in 1991. Recent reports from destination sources indicate that there is a considerable number of female domestic workers from India in Saudi Arabia. Table 2.1 (in Chapter 2) showed that Kuwait and Oman accounted for a disproportionately large share of emigration clearances granted to women between 2009 and 2014. Regular outflows to Oman and Kuwait were drastically affected by the enforcement of the security deposit in 2011 and 2014 respectively. Migration flows to the UAE remained steady, but at much lower levels.

In the absence of reliable estimates of the numbers of migrant domestic workers from India, MWDWs have been rendered invisible and migrant women's own concerns have found little resonance in the policy domain. Analysis of cross-country data suggested that in 2010, India was third among the origin countries of domestic workers in South Asia after Sri Lanka and Nepal.[135] But Bangladesh and Nepal saw a big surge in women's migration after they relaxed restrictions in 2010 and signed agreements with specific destination countries.

A compilation of scattered evidence from published sources and informal estimates in the destination in Table 5.1 shows that India has been a leading source of immigrant domestic workers in Kuwait and Oman and has a significant presence in the UAE and Bahrain. India was a principal source of domestic workers to the UAE in the early 1970s before the Philippines became the principal source, followed by Indonesia and Ethiopia.[136] The prominence of Indian women in Kuwait, Oman and the UAE may be traced to the early entry of workers from India into British zones of influence in the Middle East. Consequently, Indian workers were able to build social networks and continue migrating.

The migration of domestic workers from the source regions started in the 1960s. It was coeval with the migration of Indian women professionals, especially nurses, to these countries since the mid-twentieth century, which also created some of the demand for domestic workers. Indian domestic workers were visible in public spaces – churches and parks – and on holidays in the UAE and Kuwait.[137] According to Weiner, a substantial part of the middle and upper-classes in the Gulf relied upon India for domestic workers up to the 1970s. "The ayahs are a particularly conspicuous part of the local scene in several Gulf states. In Kuwait, for example, a thousand or more Indian ayahs can be seen on a Sunday evening in front of the city's Catholic Church talking and strolling with one another and with young Indian boys."[138] The migration of women from the Philippines as domestic workers began to gain momentum in the 1970s. The adverse effects of India's migration policy – the lack of training and support for migrant women – have been partially mitigated by the long-standing historical connections with the Middle East, which provided a rich network of informal networks and connections.

Saudi Arabia was not considered a key destination of Indian women until after 2010. There are indications of an increase in flows corresponding growing demand in that country. Soon after signing the bilateral labour mobility agreement in 2014, Saudi Arabia's labour

135 Ghosh (2010). For analysis of global and regional trends, see also Sijapati (2015) and Sijapati and Nair (2014).

136 The growth of Indian domestic workers in the UAE has not kept pace with Indonesians and Ethiopians in recent years, but they continue to be a significant presence (Sabban, 2004).

137 For descriptions of the social life of migrant women in Dubai, see Pattadath and Moors (2012) and in Kuwait, see Weiner (1982).

138 For a more detailed description, see Weiner (1982).

TABLE 5.1. TOTAL AND INDIAN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE GCC BY GENDER

Country	Year	Total MDWs in the GCC Countries		Indian MDWs in the GCC		
		All	Women	All	Women	Source
Kuwait	2018	1 000 000		350 000	90 000	TimesKuwait.com (2018), Garcia and Ransome (2017)
	2018	678 000	345 780	223 696	67 876	(Registered workers not including irregular workers) Tayah and Assaf (2018)
	2016			280 854		Immigration Dept., Kuwait, Rajya Sabha (2016)
	2012	600 000				ILO (2013)
	2010	569 536	310 402			Timothy and Sasikumar (2012)
	2001			113 000	49 000	MOIA (2001); Godfrey M. et al. (2004)
	1996		148 000		40 000	Shah and Menon (1997)
	1980				20 000	Shah (1980)
KSA	2017	2 420 000	968 000	Increased outflows		Tayah and Assaf (2018: 20)
	2014			500 000	50 000	PTI (July 10, 2014)
	2011	1 500 000				Human Rights Watch 2012
	2009	777 254	506 950			Timothy and Sasikumar (2012)
	2001				About 10,000	MOIA (2001)
Oman	2017	195 000	153 000	*(total of Indian women workers in all sectors 46 000)		Tayah and Assaf (2018) *NSCI – official statistics 2018
	2014	160 998	130 006		26 507	Begum (2016)
	2012	224 006	203 845		93 768 (India + Indonesia)	Al Mukrashi (2013)
	2010				About 30 000	Deffner and Pfaffenbach (2011)
	2009	94 592	69 256			Timothy and Sasikumar (2012)
Bahrain	2016	111 000	66 600	*19 214	*15 000	Tayah and Assaf (2018) *BLMRA, Rajya Sabha (2016)
	2011	83 198	51 811			Timothy and Sasikumar (2012)
	2008				12 000 - 15 000	Pradhan (2009)
	2005	50 000				
	2001				8 000 - 10 000	MOIA (2001)
Qatar	2016	174 000	107 880			Tayah and Assaf (2018)
	2011	132 000				Human Rights Watch (2012)
	2009	80 342	48 147	Among the sources of DWs		Timothy and Sasikumar (2012)
Abu Dhabi and Dubai	2016	306 000 (750 000)	220 320			In parenthesis unofficial figure, Tayah and Assaf (2018)
UAE (flows)	1997–2001	126350		55 818	20 307	Sabban (2004)
	2006				50 enter legally every month	IRIN (2006)

ministry announced plans to issue 100,000 visas for Indian domestic workers.[139] Saudi Arabia criticized the security deposit condition enforced by India but accepted it, unlike Kuwait. Notably, emigration clearance figures in Table 2.1 (Chapter 2) do not show a big increase in recruitment to Saudi Arabia after 2014, but reports in the wake of the incident in 2015 that led to severe injury to the Tamil domestic worker Kasturi Munirathinam in Saudi Arabia (discussed in Chapter 4) show that women have been migrating without emigration clearance.[140]

These broad trends are reflected also in the destinations of MWDWs documented through the sample survey, which also reveals some of the linkages between specific sources and destinations. The responses of MWDWs suggest that they do not necessarily make an active choice of a destination. For almost half the sample respondents from Kerala and over 40 per cent from AP, the decision of where to migrate to, was made when the agent offered them a visa to a particular country (see Table 5.2). Therefore, the destination may depend on the intermediaries who offer visas than on the women themselves. When women did make a choice, an important factor was the presence of relatives and friends in a particular country.

Table 5.3 shows that Kuwait accounted for the largest number of journeys undertaken by women for employment overseas. It was the most frequent destination of women from Kadapa, East Godavari and Trivandrum in that order. About one-third of journeys of women from Trivandrum and 40 per cent of journeys from East Godavari were to Kuwait as these source regions had a more diversified profile of destinations compared to Malappuram and Kadapa. The diversity of destinations from these source regions corresponded to the richness of

TABLE 5.2. REASONS FOR WHY WOMEN TOOK UP EMPLOYMENT IN SPECIFIC DESTINATIONS

Reasons for choosing a particular destination	Kerala	AP
Agent offered visa to that destination	48.0	43.0
I had relatives/friends in that country	47.5	50.0
My husband was there	3.4	6.4
Higher salary in that country	1.0	0.7

Source: Sample survey, 2013

TABLE 5.3. OVERSEAS JOURNEYS BY WOMEN ACCORDING TO DESTINATION AND SOURCE

Destinations	Kerala	AP	Malappuram	Kadapa
Kuwait	27.2	47.6	6.5	70.0
UAE	23.6	14.9	40.5	8.7
Saudi Arabia	19.2	3.9	27.2	12.2
Oman	9.7	12.3	8.6	3.5
Qatar	6.6	13.1	14.7	5.2
Bahrain	2.5	7.1	1.3	0.4
Lebanon	2.3	0	0	0
Others	9.0	1.0	1.2	0
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Sample survey, 2013

139 This was reported by migrant-rights.org (2014) and also by several newspapers.

140 For a more detailed discussion, see Kodoth (2019).

connections as well as the depth of migration from them. The single-largest destination of women migrating from Malappuram was the UAE. Interestingly, the Middle East is referred to in the Malabar region as *Dubai* and in AP as *Kuwaita*. The prominence of Kuwait is linked to historically strong ties that bind the country with the source regions, as discussed in Section 3 above.

Saudi Arabia was second in terms of the most frequent destinations of women from Malappuram and Kadapa. This is significant because both these regions have sizeable proportions of Muslim women who migrated. The sample from Malappuram was almost entirely Muslim and from Kadapa was one-third Muslim. Perceptions about women's employment in Saudi Arabia were polarised. As discussed in Chapter 4 above, a widely prevalent view among intermediaries as well as other men who had worked in Saudi Arabia, especially in Kadapa, was that it was a "good" destination for women because of the strict enforcement of the rules there, which prevented women from breaching social norms.

Intermediaries often compared Saudi Arabia favourably with Kuwait and the UAE, where according to them, women had greater room "to play fast and loose". Women who had worked in Saudi Arabia echoed these arguments, which could be in a bid to gain legitimacy for their migration; they underlined the view that strict enforcement of rules made it safe for women. Muslim women also underscored the Islamic credentials of the country and cited their good fortune, during their tenure, to visit the holy shrines.[141]

About one third of journeys of women from Trivandrum and 40 per cent of journeys from East Godavari were to Kuwait as these source regions had a more diversified profiles of destinations compared to Malappuram and Kadapa.

But Saudi Arabia was also viewed as a difficult place to work in by other women respondents who pointed out that women were confined in the home of the employer and were not allowed basic freedoms. Respondents pointed out that they were made to work hard, and the expected salaries were much lower than in Kuwait or the UAE. Though not frequently, women did make choices to go to particular destinations believing that it was possible to earn higher salaries there. Lathika, who has been cited in Chapter 4, had chosen to migrate to Kuwait in view of the higher expected salary there, and was enraged that she was taken to Saudi Arabia by road from Kuwait. She said she had paid for a visa to Kuwait, which had cost her more than a visa to Saudi Arabia. She explained that visas to Kuwait were more expensive because the salaries were higher.

The number of emigration clearances granted to women migrating to Oman was higher than to

TABLE 5.4. JOURNEYS BY MIGRANT WOMEN BY DECADE AND DESTINATION

Destination	1990–99	2000–09	2010 –13	Total
Kuwait	14.1 (95)	59.34 (400)	21.81 (147)	100 (674)
Oman	14.72 (29)	61.42 (121)	22.84 (45)	100 (197)
UAE	25.66 (88)	53.94 (185)	17.49 (60)	100 (343)
Qatar	32.02 (57)	53.93 (96)	7.87 (14)	100 (178)
Bahrain	12.64 (11)	66.67 (58)	19.54 (17)	100 (87)
Saudi Arabia	41.95 (86)	38.54 (79)	14.63 (30)	100 (205)

Source: Sample survey, 2013
*Figures in parenthesis are numbers of journeys

141 Muslim women interviewed in Kerala and Kadapa in 2013.

Kuwait until the security deposit condition was imposed in 2011 (Table 2.1). Table 5.4 indicates that the number of women domestic workers in Oman had continued to rise until 2012 but had reduced after that. This could be an effect of the new restrictions, but it is difficult to say for sure. Analysis of survey data substantiates the prominence of Oman as a destination of MWDWs from India in recent years. Though Table 5.3 above shows that Oman was fourth in terms of the number of journeys of women migrants in the sample, Table 5.4 shows that the proportion of women going to Oman has been higher since the year 2000 than before that. As the numbers in Table 5.4 show, Oman is third in terms of the largest destinations, following Kuwait and the UAE in 2000–09 and in 2010–13. The mobility of women as domestic workers to Saudi Arabia was higher in the 1990s and had declined since. However, this was prior to the signing of the bilateral labour mobility agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2014.

6. Mobility under the present regime

The MEA began to move, decisively, towards a new, more stringent regime of governance of migration of women in the ECR category in 2011, with the decision to enforce the bank guarantee of US$ 2,500 to be paid by sponsors of domestic workers. Emigration clearances granted to women, which plummeted immediately thereafter, continued to shrink after the MEA mandated in August 2016 that recruitment of women would be exclusively by six public sector agencies. The bank guarantee was revoked in September 2017 for women recruited through the authorized public sector agencies but remained in place for foreign employers recruiting directly through the eMigrate system.

The entry of public sector agencies could have introduced a beneficial dynamic in recruitment, but the ban, imposed simultaneously, on all private avenues of recruitment, including by recruitment agencies and social networks, dealt a blow to the possibility of ushering in open competition. Public sector agencies are hamstrung by their lack of experience in organized recruitment of MWDWs and have limited capacity to reach out to the villages and towns in the source areas. The experience of NORKA in Kerala, one of the notified public sector agencies, which signed an MOU with Al-Durra in Kuwait in April 2018, is a case in point. NORKA has been facing an uphill task to recruit 500 MWDWs.[142]

How do MWDWs obtain visas and travel overseas under the new emigration regime? It is difficult to estimate the extent of mobility under the present regime because of the resort to irregular channels of mobility. But fieldwork conducted between May and July 2019 in Kerala and AP revealed that older methods of evading restrictions on the mobility of women may have gained new dimensions even as newer practices have emerged. A striking feature of the recent phase of mobility is that MWDWs no longer incur expenses for recruitment and migration; however, this development may not be entirely benign.

These issues will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter, drawing on interviews conducted with women migrants and migration intermediaries between May and June 2019. Another question that is taken up here is why women aspirants in Kerala may be reluctant to respond to the recruitment effort by NORKA when they continue to obtain visas and overseas passage with the assistance of private intermediaries. In the last segment of this chapter, we examine the predicament of Indian MWDWs in the Middle East in terms of how India's emigration policy affects their position on the labour markets in the destination countries and limits their bargaining power with their employers.

6.1 Travel on visit visas

Travel on visit visas is a striking feature of the mobility of domestic workers under the present regime, but women migrants travelled on visit visas earlier also, for instance when they sought to avoid the regular process of emigration for one reason or another. At present, however, this practice may have gained momentum. The women interviewed for this study had obtained visit visas directly from their employers or with the help of their relatives and other networks in the destination and also through recruiting agents. Expatriate Indian families, in which both spouses are employed and where there are young children to be cared for, are an important source of demand for MWDWs in the Middle East. Interviews conducted in May–June 2019 suggest that many of these families who recruit women domestic workers from their home contexts arrange for their travel to the destination on visit visas. Travel by MWDWs on visit visas to take up employment in households of Indian expatriates is spurred by a complex of factors. For instance, the rules for emigration clearance are complex and time-consuming. These rules

142 For a detailed analysis of NORKA's experience in a wider context of how migrant domestic workers have been disregarded by the public sector agencies, see Kodoth (2018).

have changed often in the past decade and may be unfamiliar to employers. Further, sponsorship is a cumbersome process in the Middle East and could be expensive. The eligibility conditions for MWDWs both in the Middle East and in India limit employers' choices.

A case in point is the recruitment of older women. Women below 30 years and above 55 years are not permitted to migrate as domestic workers under the current emigration rules in India. As interviews with MWDWs indicated, expatriate Indian households evince a decided preference to employ women with whom they already share an acquaintance or who are recommended by people they know and trust, who may not conform to the age requirement. For instance, Nalini, who was working for a Malayali couple in Sharjah, was 66 years old in 2018, when she took up overseas employment for the first time. She was employed to take care of the infant child of the couple. Nalini was over the permitted age for emigrant women in India and for first-time MWDWs in the UAE and was employed in Sharjah on a visit visa.[143]

It was a chance meeting with her employer that led Nalini to take up this job. While visiting a temple in her hometown, Nalini ran into her present employer who inquired whether Nalini knew of a suitable woman who they could employ to take care of their infant in Sharjah. Impulsively, Nalini had offered her own services. She said, it had been her dream to travel on a plane. Her employed was very keen to employ her. Therefore, after the initial enthusiasm though Nalini expressed reservations because her husband was recovering from cancer, her employer persuaded her to take up the job. Nalini accompanied the couple to Sharjah in November 2018.

In May 2019, Nalini had already renewed her visa twice. To renew a visit visa, migrant workers must travel out of the country and return. Nalini had travelled to Muscat on the first occasion, and to a smaller airport in Oman the second time, because, according to her, on the latter occasion there was a heavy rush on the flights to Muscat. On both occasions, she travelled on her own to Oman, despite the fact that this was her first overseas visit and she had little exposure to the world outside her village in Kollam before this.

> How did you know what to do? This was, after all, the first time you had travelled outside India.
>
> Nalini: The plane goes specifically for this purpose. There were so many Malayalis on the plane. There was a woman from Kottayam. We went together.
>
> Was the woman from Kottayam also employed as a domestic worker?
>
> Nalini: No. She was searching for work in Dubai.

Visit visas were a mode of gaining overseas employment even for women who would otherwise qualify for a work visa. For instance, Radhika, who is from East Godavari, obtained a visit visa to go Dubai in 2016 through her husband who was working there. Radhika had quit a domestic work job in Qatar before her visa had expired in order to go to Dubai because her husband was there. After arriving in Dubai, Radhika found a full-time job with a Telugu family. "We searched [for a job] using WhatsApp," she said.

In Dubai, Radhika had renewed her visit visa four times by making as many visits to Oman. Radhika obtained a work visa after a year, but she returned home in early 2019, when her work visa was still valid for a year. Radhika earned between INR25,000 and INR30,000 a month in her job in Dubai in 2019. However, she did not plan to return immediately and said that she was confident that she could get a visa when she was ready to return. Going by these accounts, it was not unusual for women to be employed as domestic workers while they held visit visas.

Respondent MWDWs also spoke of how they transitioned to work visas after arriving in the destination on visit visas. Sherin's employers in Muscat, for instance, had obtained a work visa for her after she arrived in 2018 on a visit visa. Sherin, who has been cited in Chapter 4, obtained a job to take care of two small children of a Malayali doctor in Muscat. A person who travels on a visit visa to Oman must travel out of the country and return if she wishes to renew or regularize her visa, i.e., shift to a work visa in Oman. Sherin travelled to Dubai to regularize her status as a worker. She explained that her employer had made arrangements with her

143 Nalini was in Sharjah when she was interviewed on the phone on 2 June 2019. She migrated from her village in Kollam.

(employer's) sister, who lived in Dubai, to assist Sherin.

In another instance, Jyothi, who is from Ernakulum, travelled to Dubai to take up a new job only a week before she was interviewed for the study in June 2019. Before this, she had been employed in Kuwait and, like Radhika, whose work visa in Qatar had not expired when she travelled to Dubai on a visit visa, Jyothi held a Kuwait work visa when she travelled to Dubai on a visit visa. "I have come here [to Dubai] on a visiting visa. I have not cancelled my visa to Kuwait. It will get cancelled automatically in six months."

As Radhika's story makes evident, women also travelled to the Middle East on visit visas in order to search for jobs. Dubai is an attractive destination for domestic workers because of the potential to earn comparatively higher salaries than in other destinations. In another instance, Kathy left for Dubai the day before I spoke to her husband and children at their home in a highland village in Malappuram in June 2019.[144] Her husband said that before this, Kathy had been employed as a MWDW for seven years in Qatar. She had decided to try her luck in Dubai because the salary of domestic workers was higher in the Emirate. Kathy's cousins who lived in Dubai held more qualified jobs there and she would stay with them, while she searched for a job.

In the instances discussed so far, women had obtained visit visas directly from employers or by tapping their own social networks. Women may also obtain visit visas with the help of private recruiters. Prabha, who operated a recruitment agency in Bahrain for two years between 2015 and 2017, pointed out that travel on visit visas had become a regular feature for MWDWs going from India because sponsors were reluctant to recruit Indian women through the process stipulated by the GOI. Prabha said that as a recruiter in Bahrain, she had recruited over a 100 women as domestic workers. After she returned home to East Godavari, in December 2017, she had continued recruiting workers from this end and had sent them to multiple destinations in the Middle East. Prabha said that at present women recruits travel to the Middle East routinely on visit visas.

When was the last time you sent a woman overseas?

Prabha: A year ago. I sent her to Dubai.

How did you send her?

Prabha: She was sent on a visit visa.

Why did you use a visit visa and not an employment visa?

Prabha: Because the process is too long, and the sponsor has to pay more money to the government. He has to pay $2,500 to the Indian embassy as a security deposit.

Is that why employers are not interested in sending employment visas?

Prabha: The security deposit is equal to two years' salary of the housemaid.

What is the salary of women you sent for employment in Dubai?

Prabha: AED1100–1200 (roughly INR21,000–22,000)

Prabha elaborated on the process followed to place women as domestic workers after they arrived in Bahrain on visit visas. "Sponsors come to the office, select people and provide them work visas. There is one type of visit visa that is limited to a specified number of weeks or days. That visa cannot be changed into a work visa, but we can change the e-visa. As I had a little influence, I could convert e-visas to work visas." Prabha's narrative directs attention to the kind of manipulations that are possible, and which enable MWDWs to take up employment by evading the existing restrictions.

In East Godavari, brokers sought out women with offers of overseas jobs. When Kantavalli, who has been cited in Chapter 4, was interviewed in June 2019, she had in her possession the visit visa she had used to travel to Dubai in February 2017. The visa was on a separate sheet of paper and had the name of the travel agency in the destination that had recruited her. She said, "Now, most people are going like this. They are going on visit visas … Otherwise it is very difficult to go. We can go only through the agent."

Kantavalli was 64 years old in 2019. She had previously worked in Kuwait for 20 years and

144 Conversation with Kathy's husband, son, daughter and mother in law at their home in a village in the highlands of Malappuram, June 2019.

had returned home to East Godavari in 2013. She said she was not looking for work when the travel agent approached her. He told her that employers in the Gulf were looking for workers with experience like her and were willing to pay good salaries. He offered her a job of cooking in Dubai and paid her an advance of INR10,000. But he had misled her. In Dubai, her employer made her do all kinds of work and was never satisfied. "I worked for 20 days in one house. I had to take care of the children, do the cleaning, etc., they did not let me rest. The children would trouble me and would dirty the house after I had finished cleaning it. I would be scolded".

On her insistence, the employer sent Kantavalli back to the recruiting agency. "They [the employer] did not pay my salary. Maybe they paid the agency." The agency shifted her from one office to another until she says she was fed up and decided to return. "The agency wanted me to stay. My son who was working there made a phone call to the agency and asked them to send me back."

6.2 Manipulation of visa categories

Travel on visit visas to take up overseas employment was not a straightforward issue. Under the new regulations, this practice appears to have acquired an altogether new dimension. Thangi, a MWDW from Kollam, drew attention to something really puzzling about the use of a visit visa. Initially she was questioned by the airport officials in Chennai and not permitted to leave. After this, her agent organized her travel from Bangalore.

> I got the job through an acquaintance, who knew the family. I was told the visa will come soon. I said, I would leave only from Trivandrum because I have no money. But the flight was from Chennai. My family accompanied me to Chennai. We had to rent a room and there were expenses for food also. When I reached the airport, they said you can't go without emigration. My employer had arranged for a person to help me. He [the intermediary] spoke to us on the phone. I did not go to Dubai on a domestic work visa ... I had a visit visa and a company visa. When the emigration official [in Chennai] refused to let me go, the agent said I should tell him that I was going to take care of a family member, who was not well. Then the officials said I should produce the visa and passport of my family member in Dubai.
>
> After this, the person who was helping me said he will make arrangements for me to go from Bangalore. Once again all of us went to Bangalore and I left from there. At the airport I showed them the visit visa. I tore up that visa when I got into the plane. The agent told me to do that. In Dubai, the Arabi [term used by Malayali respondents to refer to Arabs] official at the counter asked me for my visa. I told him that I had torn it up and thrown it away in Bangalore. But he could not understand Malayalam. He took my passport and found my visa on the computer.[145]

Thangi says she tore up the visit visa, which was on a separate sheet of paper after she boarded the flight in Bangalore. Two travel agents in Malappuram helped interpret this puzzling behaviour. John, one of the travel agents, said it was because of the nature of manipulation of visas by intermediaries. Pointing out that he did not recruit MWDWs though he did extend ticketing services to them, he said electronic-visas (e-visas) could be digitally edited to make employment visas appear as visit visas.[146] MWDWs from India who wish to travel on employment visas must have emigration clearance from the POE which they can obtain only if they are recruited by the notified public sector agencies or directly by the employer on payment of the security deposit. In this context, an employment visa digitally edited and made to appear as a visit visa would allow women to circumvent emigration clearance. Once the MWDW is in the destination, she can claim regular status, as she would have in her possession a valid work visa.

Once she was on the flight, Thangi no longer had any use for the digitally altered and hence spurious, visit visa because she was in possession of a bona fide employment visa. This explained why her agent had advised her to destroy the spurious visit visa once she boarded the flight.

Travel agents had devised a way to camouflage employment visas so that women who obtain them privately through recruitment

145 Respondents, who have worked in the Middle East, refer to Arab men and women as Arabi and Arabicchi respectively.

146 Interview, Malappuram, June, 2019.

agencies, social networks or directly from foreign employers (but not through the online eMigrate process), i.e., through such means that are currently not permitted by the Indian government, are able to bypass the regulation and travel overseas to take up employment as domestic workers. However, any tell-tale sign of digital altering on the paper visa could attract the attention of airport officials.

John explained that this procedure could not be used to travel to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as these countries require visas to be stamped in the passport of the migrant worker. But intermediaries had devised a way around this also, at least for travel to Saudi Arabia. According to George, a travel agent in the same town as John, intermediaries were proficient in removing the Saudi visa, which is a sticker, and enabling women to travel on a separate visit visa to an intermediate destination, such as Dubai, where they would replace the sticker-visa in the passport, to enable the migrant worker to travel to Saudi Arabia. In addition, visas to Qatar (but not to the other Middle Eastern countries) were accessible online to Indian authorities, therefore it was not possible for women to travel to Qatar on digitally edited e-visas, but women could travel to an intermediate destination on a visit visa, and from there go to Qatar.

Old and new manipulations of visa categories combined with the lack of correspondence between legal terminology for visa categories in the Middle East and the terms used to refer to them by MWDWs, have resulted in some amount of confusion in women's own understanding of their visa status. Suhara, whose narrative has been cited in Chapters 3 and 4 , had been working in Sharjah for ten months on a visit visa, when she was interviewed, in May 2019.[147] She described her visa status ambiguously. "They, my employers, sent me the visa. I am on a free visa. The three-month visiting visa. Every three months we obtain a new visa. We do not have to go back home for that. We go to Sharjah airport and get the new visa. I am still on a visit visa." In response to a question, Suhara said to me that a free visa was different from an agreement visa (a reference to a work contract). She had worked in Qatar in 2007–08, when her husband was employed there, and said that she had migrated on an agreement visa, which her husband had obtained from his sponsor.

Several respondents pointed out that they were employed to do housework on "company visas", which was a prevalent way of referring to visas designated for employment in commercial establishments. These were distinct from visas for domestic work and not supposed to be used for employment in households. For instance, Jyothi, who had taken up a new job in Dubai in June 2019 on a visit visa, and whose work visa in Kuwait was still valid, said her employers would obtain a "company" visa for her after her work visa in Kuwait expired. She explained: "Now over here [a reference to the Middle East], people are using company visas. I have been on a company visa during the past two, three years."[148] This shows that she had been employed as a domestic worker on a "company visa" in Kuwait as well prior to her shift to the job in Dubai.

The difficulties of travelling on domestic-work visas had given rise to an impression among respondent MWDWs that Indian women could no longer be employed on this category of visas. Shahida, who worked for a Malayali family in Qatar, insisted that it was no longer possible for Indians to obtain domestic work visas in Qatar.[149] "I am not residing here on a maid visa. I am on a company visa … We Malayalis cannot get a maid visa here in Qatar. They [her employers] have obtained a visa, care of [in the name of] a Qatari. There is no problem. I get Rs INR25,000 as salary. I have food, a room to sleep in, they buy me everything I need." When Shahida says her employer obtained a visa "care of a Qatari", she refers to a common practice among Indian expatriate employers to avoid directly sponsoring migrant domestic workers but instead to have an Arab national, who is usually the employer of the Indian expatriate, to stand in as the formal sponsor.

If it had become more difficult for women to exit India with domestic work visas, the difficulty was pronounced in the case of Qatar, as Indian emigration officials can directly access Qatar visas online. Preethi's experience shows,

147 Interview by phone in May 2019. Suhara spoke from Sharjah.

148 Interviewed on the phone in June 2019 by an intern. Jyothi is from Ernakulum.

149 Shahida sent these responses on audio by WhatsApp in May 2019.

however, that Indian women continue to take up employment in Qatar on domestic work visas. In 2018, Preethi, who has been cited in Chapter 3, had worked in Qatar for eight months on a domestic work visa, which she obtained directly from her sponsor. Her relative who worked in the same house obtained the visa for her and a local agent in East Godavari had organized her journey. However, she did not travel directly to Qatar. She went first to Muscat and from there to Qatar.[150] She could not have travelled directly to Qatar on a work visa, because her visa would have been accessible online to Indian emigration authorities.

These narratives demonstrate the myriad ways in which MWDWs evade Indian emigration rules and continue to migrate to the Middle East even as private intermediaries continue to recruit MWDWs and organize their journeys to the destination countries. Women may travel on bona fide visit visas or by disguising employment visas to make them seem as if they are visit visas. Visit visas attracted suspicion in certain circumstances, such as when there was a flaw in the digitally edited visa or when a woman travelling on a visit visa to one country had a valid work visa in another country. However, when women were prevented by officials from leaving from one airport, intermediaries had swiftly made arrangements for them to exit through another airport. Visit visas or their digitally altered versions were not the only mode of evasion of the emigration rules. Women who obtained work visas directly from their employers or from their social networks overseas or women with visit visas who were prevented by airport official from exiting the country had been assisted by intermediaries to travel without the mandatory emigration clearance through pushing, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

6.3 Circumventing state vigilance

Women's narratives bear the marks of augmented vigilance at Indian airports. Radhika was stopped by emigration officials at Hyderabad airport when she sought to leave for Dubai on a visit visa in 2016. Officials grew suspicious because Radhika's passport showed that she also had a domestic work visa to Qatar at the time. Radhika had quit her job in Qatar before the visa expired in order to go to Dubai where her husband was located. Emigration officials at Hyderabad airport had questioned Radhika about her Qatar visa. "Because I had worked in Qatar, the airport officials questioned me saying, you have a visa to Qatar, why are you not going to Qatar?" She was not permitted to leave from Hyderabad but then her agent, who had accompanied her to Hyderabad airport, arranged subsequently for her to exit from Delhi.

Advocate Shekar, who has been assisting migrant workers to pursue legal cases against intermediaries or sponsors who had cheated them, said there was greater scrutiny of women's documents at airports at present.[151] A woman who was prevented from going to Bahrain from Hyderabad airport, in early June 2019, had approached him. Shekar explained that the woman had obtained a job in Bahrain through a local agent in West Godavari, but for some reason the airport officials had stopped her from proceeding for emigration. His narration of the woman's experience at the airport indicates that there is increased vigilance by emigration officials. "They checked her passport and as she was proceeding, an official stopped her, checked her papers again and stamped cancelled on her passport."

This woman had already worked in Bahrain for four years and therefore she was eligible for an ECNR endorsement on her passport. However, Advocate Shekar pointed out that, passport officers were now refusing to give ECNR endorsements to women with ECR passports. He added nevertheless that the woman was making new plans to leave. "She has obtained a new visa from another employer. She can go but it will be from another airport. They [women faced with such difficulties] will go through pushing, but she has lost the money that she spent on the preparations, this time".[152]

It was also evident from the interviews conducted with MWDWs in May–June 2019 that women had left for various Middle Eastern

150 Interview, East Godavari, June 2019.

151 Interview, East Godavari, June 2019.

152 Interview with a stakeholder, East Godavari, June 2019.

destinations since 2014 through pushing.[153] Among the women from Kerala, whose journeys are detailed below, Farzana had left from Delhi, Salma from Bombay, Sameera from Bangalore and Aruna from Ernakulum. Farzana is from a highland village in Malappuram. She went to Saudi Arabia in April 2017, travelling from Kozhikode first to Delhi and thence to Saudi Arabia. "When I migrated, I did not have emigration clearance. I paid money then. I went through pushing. We don't need to do anything. I gave my papers to a travel agent in Guddalore. I paid over INR100,000." Farzana had obtained the visa to Saudi Arabia from the travel agent mentioned above in Guddalore, a border town in Tamil Nadu, to whom she was introduced by a relative. Hers was a rare instance of a MWDW who had emigrated since 2016 having paid for her emigration expenses. This aspect of current emigration practices will be discussed in greater detail in section 6.4, below.

Salma was from the same village as Farzana, and she had migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2015. Her employer was looking for a husband-wife duo to work for them, and so she and her husband decided to go.

> How did you obtain visas?
>
> Salma: We got the visas through an agent. Not relatives but an acquaintance.
>
> Office?
>
> Salma: No no no, not office.
>
> Did you pay for the visa?
>
> Salma: No. For him [her husband] they charged some amount. They said no money for women. INR50,000 for Ikka [a reference to her husband] ... The agent did everything. Got us the tickets to go. I went to Manjeri to do the medical [test]. I went from Bombay because I did not have emigration [clearance]. He went from Kozhikode.

Sameera, a 35-year-old widow from a village in Malappuram, with three young children, was recruited to work in Saudi Arabia in May 2015. She left for Saudi Arabia from Bangalore.

> Why Bangalore?
>
> Sameera: Because I have not finished SSLC [class 10], they said it would be difficult to go from here [Kozhikode]. I did not incur any expenses. I stayed for a day in Bangalore. There were three or four other *chechimar* (sisters, meaning older women). That evening at 8 p.m. they sent me. The four of us went together.

Sameera's reference to her not having completed the SSLC signals the fact that she has an ECR category passport and, as a result, needed to get emigration clearance from the POE. She had not obtained emigration clearance. Her narrative implies that her agent had arranged for her departure from Bangalore airport through pushing because he was unable to do so from Kozhikode airport, which is the closest to her hometown.

The airports through which intermediaries channelled MWDWs to the destination countries varied from time to time depending on their connections with airport officials. Aruna, who migrated to Saudi Arabia in September 2016, said her agent insisted that she leave from Ernakulum, though Trivandrum was closer to her home in Kollam and she had expressed her desire to leave from there.[154]

> Why couldn't you leave from Trivandrum?
>
> Aruna: They said I cannot go from Trivandrum, that I must go from Ernakulum because they [the airport officials] are not letting people go from Trivandrum. They are not letting people go for domestic work from Trivandrum. We told them it would cost money for transport to Ernakulum. It cost INR5,000 for a taxi, but they said they would pay for transport. My family came to Ernakulum. The flight was at 12 noon. It was through Colombo, where I changed flights and came to Riyadh.

The extant emigration rules exempted emigrant women who wished to go back to work for the same sponsor from obtaining emigration clearance. Like many of the rules governing the migration of domestic workers, this provision also is not without problems. The provision could encourage emigrant workers, especially

153 Ahmedabad and Nagpur were used by women interviewed in Trivandrum in 2016 and 2017. One of them had migrated to Saudi Arabia, from Ahmedabad, in September 2016, and the other had migrated to Kuwait, after the POE stopped giving emigration clearance to the country, in 2014.

154 Interview by telephone from Saudi Arabia, May 2019.

those who may have a strong desire to continue working overseas, to remain in employment with the same sponsor even when the sponsor is exploitative, in order to avoid the hassle of obtaining emigration clearance, which would be necessary if they wanted to obtain a new visa. However, the rampant evasion of emigration clearance procedures shows that migrant women may not be constrained by the provision at present.

Small informal networks of intermediaries, discussed extensively in Chapter 4, were proactive in mobilizing aspiring women for employment in the Middle East under the present regime. Some of them routinely misled the women aspirants about the nature of their jobs, withheld crucial information from them and took custody of women's documents, thus preventing them from validating information. But these networks were effective in enabling women to migrate. They had identified pliable officials and organized pushing from airports where these officials were stationed. Michelle, who is from a coastal village in Trivandrum, and had left the country from Ahmedabad through pushing explained how a network of agents had operated to get her to Saudi Arabia. She was among eight women who had been mobilized by this informal network from different parts of Kerala. The women had travelled by train, first to Bombay, where an intermediary met them and accompanied them on another train to Ahmedabad.

However, it may be erroneous to infer from the activities of dodgy informal networks that private intermediaries are the problem and that action against them will put an end to irregular mobility. Quite to the contrary, while the new rules have generated greater scope for the exploitation of MWDWs in the recruitment process, women's continued defiance of these rules questions the logic of state protectionism and exposes the irrelevance of the ECR mechanism. The migration trajectories of women respondents demonstrate how the ECR mechanism is neither necessary nor appropriate to protect them from harassment and abuse.

6.4 Rising demand and elimination of migration expenses

The demand for migrant labour in the Middle East has changed significantly in the recent past. The demand for many categories of migrant workers has been declining on account of government policies in the Middle East that have been encouraging the employment of nationals. However, migrant domestic work is an exception to this trend as the demand for migrant workers has actually increased. Two factors that have contributed to the increase in the demand for domestic and care-sector workers in the Middle East and led to scarcity of this segment of workers are the rising work participation rates of women nationals in these countries and the ongoing process of ageing. To add to the scarcity in the destination countries, origin countries have imposed restrictions and prohibitions on the mobility of women domestic workers from time to time, in response to abusive treatment of these workers in these countries. In the past decade, some of the destination countries began to search proactively for new sources, in order to fend off demands from origin countries for better remuneration and improvements in working conditions. Consequently, destination countries have also entered into formal agreements with origin countries and with recruiting agencies within them to facilitate sustained flows of workers.[155]

As mentioned in Chapter 3, India was one of the earliest sources of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, but the ethnic and national profile of MWDWs in the Middle East has become more and more diverse. In this altered context of labour demand, India has shifted to a new emigration regime for MWDWs which culminated in the stipulation that recruitment must be exclusively by notified public sector agencies. In the altered context of demand, however, travel agents and other private recruiters have pointed out that they were receiving plentiful offers of visas from recruiters and employers in the Middle East.[156]

Visas to Saudi Arabia are reported to be particularly easy to obtain. Women were recruited in groups to that country by informal networks of agents. For instance, Michelle,

155 Al-Durra was established in 2015, explicitly, in the wake of public demand, to reduce the cost of sponsoring MDWs.

156 Interviews in Malappuram and East Godavari, June 2019.

who, as pointed out in section 6.3 above, was among eight women from Kerala who had been taken to Ahmedabad to be sent to Saudi Arabia in September 2016. In an instance reported by a woman who was rescued from Saudi Arabia, the recruiting agent had claimed that they were scouting for 50 women to work for a royal family.[157]

Some respondents like Radhika and Jyothi had quit jobs in the destination country, before their visas had expired, confident that they would be able obtain new visas. Radhika, who returned to her village in East Godavari in 2019, had quit two jobs, one in Qatar in 2016 and one in Dubai in 2019 in the past few years. She said she did not want to migrate immediately but she was also confident that she would be able to obtain a job when she was ready to migrate again.

> Do you want to go again?
>
> Radhika: Yes, but not immediately. I will go after some time.
>
> How will you obtain a visa?
>
> Radhika: If we want to go, there are people we know who will send us the visa from there.
>
> Do you mean from Dubai?
>
> Radhika: Dubai, Qatar or whichever place. We can obtain a visa.

As Salma pointed out in Section 6.3 above, intermediaries were no longer charging women for their migration expenses. This is a striking new development. Previously, despite legislation to the contrary in the Middle East, women domestic workers were rarely able to migrate without incurring substantial expenses. Farzana, for instance, had paid upwards of INR 100,000 to migrate to Saudi Arabia in 2017. But this seems to have changed. Preethi, who migrated to Qatar in 2018, pointed out that her sponsor had reimbursed all her expenses, including that which she had paid to the recruiting agent in her home town in East Godavari. Her mother-in-law, who was present during the conversation, interjected to say that this would not have been possible earlier. "We used to spend money for the visa and we used to go through agents. The money was not returned to us by the sponsor.

In the past few years, even when the migrant women obtained passage through irregular channels, they had not incurred expenses. Salma, Sameera and Aruna exited the country through pushing but they did not incur any cost for their visas, emigration procedures or travel.

I borrowed money to obtain the visa. Now they are giving money for the visa and also for the ticket".[158]

Notably, even when they obtained passage through irregular channels, migrant women had not incurred expenses. Salma, Sameera and Aruna exited the country through pushing but did not bear the costs of their visas, emigration procedures or travel. Aruna, who paid her agent INR40,000 in 2008 to migrate to Kuwait, said one of the reasons for why she had agreed to take up a job in Saudi Arabia in 2017 was that the offer entailed no expense for her. Having heard stories of harassment by employers in Saudi Arabia, she had been sceptical about taking up a job there. Her brother-in-law had made more inquiries and reassured her. "He told me, try it and see. The job is to take care of an old woman. She is unwell. You only need to take care of her, he said. They will pay for all the expenses to go there."

However, the incentive structure built into the migration governance system is such that this important change may not be entirely benign. Previously, the benefit of the legislation requiring sponsors to pay for the expenses of the migration of workers was misappropriated by the recruitment industry. Women migrants paid for their visas and emigration expenses, but also bore the brunt of a sense of entitlement that their sponsors acquired on account of having paid large sums of money to recruit them. Recent reports that women did not incur expenses for their migration any longer imply

157 The case was documented by SEWA, which had intervened to rescue the woman and repatriate her (Conversation with a SEWA activist).

158 Interview, East Godavari, June 2019.

that the recruiting industry can no longer siphon off the money paid by sponsors for these expenses. Notably, however, this change has been accompanied by a flurry of news reports that MWDWs are being held hostage by their recruiting agents in the destination when they choose to discontinue their contracts and return home.[159]

To understand how this new form of coercion is related to migration costs, we need to unpack the reports of irregular detention of workers. The husband of a MWDW interviewed in East Godavari in June 2019 revealed that his wife's recruitment agent in Qatar was demanding INR100,000 from him to send his wife back home. Ravi, a daily wage labourer in East Godavari, was under considerable stress. He pointed out that his wife was in the custody of her recruitment agent after she had discontinued her job. It had not yet been three months since she arrived in Qatar. He said he had agreed to pay INR50,000 but the agent was unwilling to lower the price.

Ravi said his wife had obtained a visa with the help of her mother, who worked in Qatar. The family did not incur any expenses on her visa or journey but an agent in West Godavari, who arranged for her travel, gave them INR10,000 as a "hand out", i.e., they were given to understand that they would not need to repay this amount. Ravi said his wife left the country believing that she would be working in the same house as her mother. On reaching Qatar, however, Ravi's wife was placed in another house where she found it difficult to cope with the new circumstances. A return migrant who knew Ravi well pointed out that there had been complaints from her employer that she was on the phone, constantly, with her children and her mother. Ravi said recruiting agents in Qatar and West Godavari were involved in arranging his wife's journey and that she had travelled on a company visa. He also insisted that his mother-in-law had refused to extend support to his wife.

At the instance of the author and in her presence, Ravi met advocate Shekar and during the conversation, it emerged that Ravi's mother-in-law may be complicit with the recruiting network and may have received a commission from the agency for persuading her daughter to migrate. The advocate explained that it was likely that Ravi's family was paid INR10,000 from the money received from the network. He said this would also explain why Ravi's mother-in-law refused to support her daughter who wanted to return home. He explained that sponsors were paying the equivalent of INR200,000 to recruiters to obtain domestic workers. This sum paid by them was distributed among all those people who assisted in the process of recruitment. He also said Ravi's wife may have been duped by her mother into thinking that she would be working in the same house as her.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, above, when Preethi returned home from Qatar without completing a year of service, her sponsor had nevertheless paid her return expenses. The difference between Preethi's situation and that of Ravi's wife was that Preethi was recruited directly by her sponsor and merely assisted by an agent in her hometown to make preparations for her journey. She was not dependent on an agent in the destination to arrange for her return home. Under the amended emigration rules of 2017, the enhanced service charges of recruitment agencies includes among other expenses, "the cancellation charges imposed by the foreign employer on recruitment when candidates refused to travel [to the destination] or want early repatriation".[160] Because women who migrated in recent years were not charged any fees, this meant that the amount paid by the sponsor was being used to cover all the expenses incurred on their migration. In the event of an early repatriation, recruitment agencies in the destination countries are required to reimburse a portion of the amount paid by the sponsor, hence these recruitment agencies may try to extract money from migrant workers to make up for the loss they would incur.

Prabha, cited in chapter 4, who managed a recruiting agency in Bahrain as recently as 2017,

159 See Nagaraj (2019). It was reported that women recruited by NORKA for Al-Durra in Kuwait, who wanted to return home owing to difficulties at work, were detained in the destination and told by Al-Durra officials that they could return only on payment of Rs 1.5 lakh to the recruitment agency. The husband of the woman who had been detained reported that his wife was not provided decent working conditions and was made to work round the clock. She did not have enough time even to cook her own food. After this was highlighted by the media, the woman was allowed to return without making the payment (Kuttapan, 2020a and b).

160 MEA. 2017. No Z-11025/279/2009-Emig, GOI, MEA office memorandum dated 15 December 2017.

also shed light on the circumstances in which migrant workers may be detained forcefully by recruiting agencies. When a recruit refused to continue to work for a sponsor or a sponsor brought her back to the agency, Prabha said, "I would deduct 30 per cent of the money the sponsor had paid us for office charges and return the remaining amount to the sponsor, take [custody of] the woman's passport and release the housemaid. If she wants to continue [to work for another sponsor], that was good and I would find her another house. But some women will not agree."

In the narrative above, to "release the housemaid" refers to the cancellation of legal ties with the sponsor in question. At the recruiting agency, this sponsor had returned the MWDWs passport, which was in his custody, and "released" her from his legal sponsorship after completing the formalities of the process. Prabha continued saying that it was good if the MWDW agreed to work for another sponsor. Difficulties arise when women do not agree, i.e., they insist on returning home, because then the recruiting agency stands to lose money. Though Prabha does not say this, narratives of MWDWs show that in such situations, agents may resort to pressure tactics and forceful detention to force these recruits to pay them for the loss they would incur if the woman chose to return home.

It would be useful here to recall the discussion in Chapter 4 (section 4.3) above, of the perverse incentives that informal recruiting networks have to prevent MWDWs from returning home before the completion of their contracts. The recent news reports of illegal detention of MWDWs by recruiting agents in the destination countries suggest that something similar may be unfolding on a wider scale. These reports direct attention to fundamental problems with a governance regime that requires sponsors to pay the migration expenses of workers.

6.5 Why do women migrate through local intermediaries and not through NORKA?

In April 2018, NORKA signed an MOU with Al-Durra to recruit 500 women domestic workers. The terms of employment of MWDWs from Kerala included a monthly salary of KD110 (about INR26,000), no expenses for recruitment and travel, recruits would have six months to learn the job during which time they or their employers may seek a change of employment, and Al-Durra would provide insurance cover for repatriation expenses in the event of a forced return after a period of six months. Expenses were to be paid by NORKA if the recruits decided to return before the completion of six months. Al-Durra had also agreed to pay INR30,000 to NORKA as the service charge for recruitment that was stipulated under the amended emigration rules of 2017. Further, as a safety measure, Al-Durra agreed to establish a call centre in all Kuwaiti Governorates, employing in each a person who spoke Malayalam and also to equip each recruit with a local sim card to contact the call centre, in case of harassment by the employer.

Not only has NORKA been plagued by difficulties in its efforts to mobilize a sufficient number of candidates, but there has also been a high attrition rate of candidates who had initially expressed interest in the scheme. Moreover, several recruits had returned from Kuwait citing concerns related to their families at home and their inability to cope with the heavy workload in their jobs. Some of the terms of the agreement NORKA had signed with Al-Durra were in accordance with the legal provisions of the destination countries but flouted the working conditions stipulated by the Indian government. For instance, the contract with Al-Durra specifies a 12-hour working day for MWDWs, which is in accordance with the Kuwaiti national law,[161] but exceeds the 8-hour working day specified under the Indian government-stipulated employment contract for MWDWs.[162]

To add to this, the salary agreed upon of 110 Kuwaiti Dinars (KD) (INR26,000) is on par with the minimum wage prescribed by the Indian government and lower than the minimum wage of KD120 prescribed by the Philippines government for MWDWs in Kuwait. A minimum wage is a floor wage, which deems that the market wage should not go below it. By settling for a wage, at the level of the minimum wage, and not taking into account factors such as the experience of the workers or their specific skill

161 A 12-hour working day is permitted under the Kuwait Law No. 68 of 2015 on Employment of Domestic Workers.

162 This is a point made by SEWA.

sets, NORKA either was not assertive enough or was bargaining from a position of weakness. This would strike an observer as anomalous because Al-Durra was formed specifically on account of scarcity of MWDWs in Kuwait and had taken the initiative to tie up with NORKA.[163]

The agreement between NORKA and Al-Durra also mandates a weekly day off. This is a tricky issue because it is well known that Indian women in full-time, live-in jobs in the Middle East are rarely given a day off, even though it is mandated by the law in destination countries. The analysis of survey data from this study showed that Indian MWDWs rarely received the benefit of regular weekly holidays.[164] Only 20 per cent of MWDWs in the sample from Kerala and 10 per cent of MDWS in the sample from AP reported that their employers allowed them a weekly holiday in their last or current jobs. As against this, 68 per cent of women from Kerala and 75 per cent of women from AP said they were not allowed holidays. About 8 per cent of MWDWs in both states said they had either one or two holidays a month and a small number reported being allowed to take a holiday once a year, on Christmas. A few said they did not have a regular holiday but could take a day off on request.

A provision for a day off, when MWDWs experiences show that it is rarely enforced, raises the question of whether NORKA was adequately informed about the working conditions of Indian MWDWs in the Middle East. Indeed, NORKA may have done better to negotiate additional payment for work on leave days.[165]

That said, the salary and safety features of the MOU with Al-Durra may not compare poorly with the present terms of employment of many Indian MWDWs in the Middle East. But if this is the case, why isn't the NORKAs scheme attractive to aspirant women migrants? What could be preventing aspiring women migrants from approaching NORKA, when reports suggest that they continue to obtain visas through private intermediaries?[166] At a loss to explain this puzzle, a NORKA official attributed it to a habitual resort to irregularity by women migrants!

> There were a lot of inquiries but interest has ceased. My personal belief is that there are a lot of persons who want jobs but they are not coming to NORKA ... You need only a passport. If you have a passport, NORKA will cover all your expenses. But people are not coming, they are going through illegal channels ... There are 1,000 women who arrive illegally in Kuwait every month, according to the embassy there.[167]

Did NORKA assume, incorrectly, that aspirants would flock to it when it started recruitment, given its stature as a government agency? With the benefit of hindsight, and substantiated by insights from the field, it is possible to identify a number of reasons for why NORKA has struggled to recruit women candidates. Insufficient and/or misdirected outreach by the government agency may be an important problem. Most migrant women and recent returnees, interviewed in May–June 2019, had not heard of NORKA's recruitment initiative. Several of these women had not even heard of NORKA. In contrast, migrants did not lack information about how to obtain visas from private intermediaries and some of them even had the means to obtain visas directly from overseas employers.

The discussion in chapters 3 and 4 above elaborated on how the private recruiting agents were collectively demonized in the public discourse, but MWDWs narratives showed that their experiences of being recruited by private recruiters varied. Notably, the analysis in Chapter 3 also showed that broadly speaking, MWDWs had improved their economic position, at least incrementally, between their first and subsequent journeys.

In initiating the recruitment of MWDWs for Al-Durra in early 2018, NORKA had swung from steadfast refusal to recruit this segment of workers to what seems to have been an ill-prepared effort, based on an insufficient understanding of supply characteristics. The

163 For details of the context in which the MOU was signed, see Kodoth (2018). This is evident also in the fact that TOMCOM, which has more recently signed an MOU with Al-Durra, has a flexible wage which is negotiated taking into account the experience of the worker (conversation with an official of TOMCOM, January, 2020).

164 Author's survey of MWDWs in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, 2013.

165 Sonia George, SEWA General Secretary at a seminar at the Centre for Development Studies, November 2018.

166 See indembkwt.gov.in/Pages/visa_20_contract_domestic.pdf, accessed on 10 November 2018.

167 NORKA official, cited in Kodoth (2018).

pejorative views expressed by officials of government agencies of MWDWs, which had also been advanced to justify previous refusal by these agencies to recruit MWDWs, suggest a social distance between government officials and this segment of workers. An observation made by a NORKA official in the wake of the recruitment effort is telling in this regard.

The official, who had met the women who had been recruited by NORKA for Al Durra at a one-day training program in September 2018, expressed surprise about their backgrounds and their levels of awareness.

> "Why do they go? It is not [a] settled [question]. My situation makes me go, my family situation. There are many reasons. Those who came for training were from good families. They were aware of everything. If I can get a reasonable salary, why would I go? We do not know enough about these things. There is need for research."

This official felt the need to point out that the recruits were from "good families" which would be surprising if not for an assumption about the typical social backgrounds of MWDWs, i.e., that typically MWDWs are not from "good families". Another official of NORKA substantiated this point saying that the recruits did not come from the expected backgrounds, "they are not too poor, but also not affluent, they are somewhere in between". These views echo the prejudices of government officials discussed in Chapter 4, that MWDWs are from "dysfunctional" families and are characteristically "deviant", i.e., not bound by social/gender norms.

To mobilize candidates, NORKA officials had at first reached out through advertisements in the mass media and additionally their own social networks. As it turned out, this outreach was largely in regions that did not have a history of the migration of women as domestic workers. If the women NORKA had recruited in 2018 did not correspond to the expected profile of migrant domestic workers, the enthusiasm of some of these recruits for overseas jobs also ebbed quickly. An official revealed that the main reason given by the women for dropping out was that their families were not in favour of them migrating.

Subsequently, as a NORKA official pointed out, the agency had made efforts to disseminate information about the recruitment initiative in the "hotspots" of women's migration, presumably the conventional source regions. Interviews with MWDWs in May-June 2019 in some of these areas suggests that NORKA may not have been able to make headway quickly in these areas because of the social distance between them and potential aspirants. However, the lackadaisical reception of NORKA's recruitment initiative is also an opportunity to see the problem from below. To do this we could ask: could years of an adverse emigration policy have generated a lack of trust in government agencies among MWDWs and their families? If a public sector agency was not the preferred choice of women aspirants in the conventional sending areas, then there would be a need for a sufficiently persuasive outreach by government recruitment agencies.

Women's narratives suggest that there were two quite different reasons for why they may not respond to NORKA's scheme. One, the scheme lacked appeal for women who had set their sights on employment on the informal market, i.e., those who migrate on free visas. NORKA's scheme binds candidates to work in full-time, live-in employment for a sponsor, which not only limits MWDWs flexibility and independence, but is also less remunerative.

This is evident from the responses of Fauzia and Asma, both cited in chapter 4, who had worked on free visas. Fauzia had returned from Bahrain in 2018, and she indicated disinterest in NORKA's initiative, saying that it was not difficult for her to obtain a visa if she wanted to go. She had over 30 years of experience of working in the Middle East and had taken up multiple types of employment in Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. On her last visit in 2016, she obtained the free visa with the help of her neighbour in her home village, who had been working overseas for the past 40 years. She was compelled to quit this job and return home because her sister fell critically ill and there was none else to nurse her. Her sister died but Fauzia was unable to go back to Bahrain because her sister's son was still in school and her sister's daughter had just finished college. There was nobody to take care of them.

Asma, who had returned from Saudi Arabia, in 2017, also was not impressed by NORKA's initiative. She had earned INR60,000 a month providing post-natal care to expatriate Malayali women in Saudi Arabia and was not keen to take up a job as a full-time domestic worker, which would pay her much less. She told us that her friend in Abu Dhabi had promised to get her a

free visa. Asma planned to migrate again by the end of the year.

The ongoing reforms in some of the Middle Eastern countries such as the flexi-permits available in Bahrain, which is akin to "formalization" of the free visas, and the Tadbeer Centres in the UAE, which makes it possible for MWDWs to engage in part-time work, raise the possibility for government agencies like NORKA to offer more flexible forms of employment for MWDWs.

The second reason is related to a segment of MWDWs, who in slightly altered circumstances may respond to NORKA recruitment scheme, such as it is at present. The interviews conducted in May–June 2019 that most of the women aspirants who were making plans to migrate and had been promised visas by local intermediaries were not willing to reconsider their plans. Farzana, for instance, told us that Salma's husband had promised her a visa to Qatar. Salma and her husband lived not far from Farzana's house and as pointed out in Chapter 4, they were also migrants. Though Farzana had returned from Saudi Arabia just two months prior to the interview, after a harrowing experience there, she exuded confidence that the job she had been promised would be a good one. She did not know how much she would receive as her salary, but backed her confidence saying that Salma's husband had placed two older women from the village in good circumstances in Saudi Arabia.

It was learnt from Salma that her husband did not obtain visas directly from employers in the Middle East or from recruitment agencies. His contact was an agent in a nearby village. This agent was known locally as a visa *kachavadakkaran* (trader). He did all the paperwork and accompanied migrant workers to the airport to see them off. Speaking to his wife, it was difficult to conjure up the picture of a manipulative intermediary, who made disproportionate profits at the expense of migrant workers. As we made efforts to locate their house, however, the agent's wife who was standing with a group of women in the foreground of a neighbour's house did not at first reveal her identity.[168] The women in the group directed us to a house that was a few steps away and as we waited in front of this house, it was a short while before the agent's wife approached us and revealed her identity.

There has been little engagement with the lowest tiers of intermediaries, the itinerant brokers that crisscross the villages in the source regions and mobilise aspirants for migrant jobs.

As she became more relaxed, she said she was worried that we may have come to take her husband to task on account of someone he had sent overseas. "People come here and shout at us. There is no limit to how they insult us. I was worried that something had gone wrong with someone my husband had sent overseas." The agent's wife indicated that they undertook somewhat big risks. She had pledged her gold bangles recently to allow her husband to buy the tickets for two male migrant workers because the recruiting agency in the destination country had not sent the money and the visa would have expired if he did not send them. The agent had lost the money because the two migrant workers had absconded from their employers.

There has been little engagement with the lowest tiers of intermediaries, the itinerant brokers that crisscross the villages in the source regions and mobilize aspirants for migrant jobs. The current understanding of this critical chink in the migration chain may be as partial and limited as the understanding of the experiences of migrant domestic workers. It bears recognition that the local intermediaries are not a separate or distinct class of people when compared to the local people from whom migrant workers are drawn.

Salma's husband was part of the chain of intermediaries that recruited MWDWs, but also a migrant worker himself and further, he and Salma had worked until recently as migrant domestic workers. Salma's husband and the visa *kachavadakkaran* from whom he obtained visas for women in his neighbourhood lived in circumstances that were not significantly different from those of the people they recruited. In this particular instance, the visa

168 I was accompanied by a local women's activist when I approached her.

kachavadakkaran's living circumstances did not suggest that he was substantially better off than the women he recruited. His old-style, small brick and tile house could have done with repairs. He wife said that he had struggled to cope with the expenses of medical treatment for his deceased first wife, who suffered from mental illness. He had remarried subsequently and was struggling to educate two young children from his first marriage.

If Farzana knew that Salma's husband would not be obtaining the visa directly from the employer, she did not say so. What is important, however, is that it may have mattered little to her. Women migrants and their intermediaries are held together by their shared social circumstances. Though women's relationship with intermediaries could be exploitative to varying extents, structural conditions and systemic discrimination foster and strengthen the ties that bind MWDWs and local intermediaries.

At present, NORKA poses little competition to local intermediaries. As Aruna pointed out about her home context in Kollam, information about opportunities is dispersed in localities where potential migrants live. "We only need to leave word with people we know in nearby houses, with our friends or other people we know. The people who supply visas do likewise. They ask whether there are women who would be interested in going overseas for work and whether they are good". Asma, Fauzia, Sameera, Salma and Farzana echoed this view about the respective home contexts.

Sameera's experience, for instance, shows how well networked the intermediaries are and how they learn about the circumstances of women and approach them. Sameera was recruited by local intermediaries, who approached her after her husband died, when she was struggling to make a living by taking up irregular jobs providing post-natal care. It was apparent at the time that she needed a steady income. One of the intermediaries, Prasad, had a relative in Sameera's locality. This man had approached Sameera and told her that he could obtain a visa for her. "You can go and find a way out of your problems. Are you interested?" he had asked. When her visa was ready, he instructed her to go to Bangalore. "Akbar was there to receive us in Bangalore. There was another *chechi* [sister] with me on the bus." When she arrived in Saudi Arabia, Sameera said two men from Kerala received her at the airport. "They are agents there. They work in the office there. They picked me up and called the Arabi [a reference to her sponsor]. I did not go to the office. The Arabi picked me up on the way."

Compared to the local intermediaries, NORKA is distant and unfamiliar to people in the source regions. Yet, the differentiated nature of supply, implies that a segment of workers aspirants may be steered away from dodgy private intermediaries towards NORKA's initiative. During the course of the field work, it was apparent that NORKAs scheme was attractive to the more vulnerable segments of aspirants, who lacked personal connections overseas than to better connected aspirants.

The MWDWs are likely obtain assistance from private intermediaries and defy regulations when their aspirations are denied. Aspiring women migrants perceive private intermediaries as resourceful and capable. India's emigration policy, which assumes that women are naïve and therefore easy prey for predatory intermediaries, diverts attention from the problems with the existing governance structures and shifts the responsibility for the problems faced by MWDWs on to individual actors, i.e., the women themselves and/or private intermediaries.

6.6 Making reasoned decisions

Chapter 3 has examined the decision-making process within families of MWDWs from Kerala and AP. In the altered present policy context, women migrants from both states have harnessed their networks and their own personal resources to negotiate the fraught path between the increased protectionism of emigration policy and their own aspirations. Interviews with women who had migrated under the new regime showed that they made deliberate choices to seek overseas employment and moved across countries and between visa categories, sifting through the information and the options available to them.

It must be recalled, however, that as an occupation domestic work involves work in private homes that are characterized by intimate relationships. In particular, full-time, live-in paid domestic work may involve the development of close personal ties, which may ease some of the systemic problems in employment relationships. From the employers' perspective, it may be beneficial to recruit workers with whom, or

from families with which, they have some prior familiarity. Drawing on the kin circles of existing workers is often considered a mutually beneficial solution for employers and workers. It enables employers to tide over information asymmetry and migrant women to retain "good" opportunities within their own families or close kin circles.

Radhika, for instance, took up her first overseas job in Qatar in 2013, when she replaced her grandmother in a job that the latter had held for a decade. "My grandmother worked in Qatar for 10 years. She asked me to work in the same house as the people there were good. They sent me a visa after my grandmother came back home." As pointed out in Chapter 3, there were several instances of households in the Middle East that had employed more than one woman from East Godavari, who shared close spatial or kinship ties. While this was a marked feature of migration for domestic work from East Godavari, it was much less prevalent in Kerala, at least partly because migration from Kerala was losing momentum, with comparatively fewer younger women taking up domestic work jobs.

Invariably, MWDWs in full-time, live-in jobs are drawn into a pre-existing web of relationships, (which involves other MWDWs also) even as, at the same time, they are positioned as outsiders within these families. Radhika underlines the distinct nature of exchange in domestic work jobs.

She had quit her first job in Dubai (which she took up after moving from Qatar), when her visa was still valid for one more year.

> Why did you return? Was the work tough?
>
> Radhika: There was less work in Dubai than in Qatar but madam [in Dubai] was mentally somewhat sick. She had three children and the food was not good. That is why I decided to return.
>
> Did the employer scold you?
>
> Radhika: Yes, she used to scold me but the work was all right, and she used to pay my salary on time. In Qatar, it was good, they used to take care of me.
>
> Then why did you quit the job in Qatar?
>
> Radhika: My husband was in Dubai, that is why.

Radhika's response shows that regular live-in domestic work is rarely impersonal and detached. It is important, therefore, to go beyond the general features of paid domestic work to grapple with women's experiences. Radhika points out that a mutually caring relationship could develop between employers and domestic workers, irrespective of the quantity of work. Radhika quit her job in Qatar with an employer she described as caring in order to seek work in a place where she could be closer to her husband. As both of them were working overseas, this was a reasonable decision to make.

The nature of work and the live-in employment relationship usually entail multiple forms of exchange. This could lead to the development of different levels of intimacy but also its obverse, i.e., hostility and suspicion, between employers and workers. Exploitation and abuse of MWDWs are generated within this framework, especially when employers believe that they have some kind of ownership over the women they recruit. Relationships may get abrasive, when misunderstandings are not resolved and may break down because of incompatibility between employers and workers or because of heightened mutual suspicion.

Thangi's narrative (she had torn up her e-visa after boarding the flight to Dubai) showed that she was continuously processing the information available to her about migration opportunities. She obtained the job in Dubai in 2016 and remained in that job only for six months. "I returned because I started bleeding [the reference is to menstrual bleeding]. It got very bad so after some time, I told my employer. They took to me the hospital and I was treated but the expenses were deducted from my salary. I was not paid anything for the last month. I had a really difficult time in Dubai".

Thangi had a problem of excessive menstrual bleeding before she migrated to Dubai and she had undergone a dilation and curettage (D and C) procedure prior to migration. The doctor in Dubai told her she would need another D and C. She said she did not have insurance coverage in Dubai and therefore, had chosen to return home for the procedure. Thangi's employer deducted one month's salary to pay for the cost of her return. Besides, Thangi also said, the job had been a difficult one. She was in charge of a young girl who was abusive.

> She used to hit me. She was like that because they spoilt her. The work involved cooking, cleaning, bathroom cleaning. They entertained

> guests frequently and we had to stay up late till 2 a.m., clear up everything and clean up. I had to take her to school and go to bring her back. I used to wash her and give her food. It was really tough.

Subsequently, in 2018, she obtained employment with a Malayali family in Muscat. Her employers in Oman, hired her for 180 Omani riyals, the value of which had gone up from INR24,000 in early 2018 to INR27000 in 2019. She had received the equivalent of INR18,000 three years ago in her previous job in Dubai as discussed above.

When interviewed in May 2019, Thangi was in her hometown in Kollam, as she had accompanied her employer who had come home for medical treatment. She continued to work in their home in Ernakulum, but the family paid her only a nominal wage in accordance with the local wage rates. Meanwhile, she had been offered a visa to Abu Dhabi by a friend. "I have a friend in Abu Dhabi. She asked me to go there." In Abu Dhabi, her friend makes the equivalent of INR50,000 a month and is paid by the hour. Referring to her job in Oman, Thangi said, "[t]his is a loss. When there is a party, we have to stay awake till 2 a.m." Thangi had requested her Muscat employer to relieve her but they refused saying they would go back to Muscat soon. It had been three months already since she had come to Kerala with her employer and she was restive, wanting either to resume her full-time job or to be relieved so that she could obtain another job.

In assessing their jobs, Radhika and Thangi were concerned with their workload, their remuneration and other conditions of employment as well as their affective relations with employers. They were not unaware of the difficulties of overseas employment, but they were keenly aware that overseas opportunities could yield higher remuneration than work on the labour market at home. It was this awareness that drove their aspirations. Thus, an analysis of a wider range of experiences of MWDWs demonstrates why it is important to steer away from overarching representations of them and exercise rigour as well as caution in assessing their migration experiences.

> **. India's long-term protectionism has undermined the collective position of MWDWs from the country on the destination-country labour markets.**

6.7 Destination labour markets and emigration policy

Emigration policies of origin countries condition the labour market position of their MWDWs in the destination countries in important ways, as they affect the levels of skills, qualifications and training that workers possess and determine the bargaining power of workers. India's long-term protectionism has undermined the collective position of MWDWs from the country on the destination-country labour markets. India's emigration policy and the position of Indian women on the destination-country labour markets have also had a feedback effect on the perceptions of MWDWs in India and in the source regions of migration.

The narratives of three relatively successful women migrants are analyzed in this section to draw attention to how emigration policy has shaped the collective position of Indian MWDWs on the destination-country labour markets and affected the bargaining power of Indian MWDWs. Aruna and Dhanlakshmi, two of the women whose narratives are discussed here, had worked for Arab families and both emphasised the point that they were paid lower wages than their Filipina co-workers even when they were required to do work of equal worth or entrusted with greater responsibility than their Filipina co-workers. Jyothi's narrative, by contrast, brought into view the trade-offs and uncertainties associated with working for Indian expatriates, who may be less bound by labour market conditions in the destination countries, unless they employ workers on the informal markets there.

6.7.1 Aruna

In May 2019, Aruna had been working with a family in Saudi Arabia for two years.[169] Prior to this, she had spent six years working for

169 She was from Kollam in Kerala and spoke to the author on WhatsApp in May 2019.

an Arab family in Kuwait, where she was paid lower wages than her Filipina co-workers. Aruna believes that her employers in Kuwait entrusted her with greater responsibility than they did her Filipina co-workers. The couple Aruna worked for in Kuwait had two sons. Three years after she was employed by them, her woman employer conceived again after a gap of 18 years.

> She asked me if I would take care of the child. I said I would love to have a little girl to care for. Then she said, she could not ensure it would be a girl. She gave birth to a girl. From the beginning it was I who took care of the child. Over there, the women do not bother much with infants. Madam would leave the child with me at night and sleep in a separate room with her husband. It was very difficult work because the child would cry and I could not sleep... It was I who gave the child a mother's warmth (*Oru ammeda choode koduthathu njananne*)... I left the job when the child was two and half years old.

A Filipina worker was already working for the family in 2008, when they recruited Aruna. Aruna says, she and the Filipina worker did not get along well.

> She used to quarrel with me and create a lot of trouble for me. My employer said she would not renew her contract. She was paid KD50 and I was paid KD45. She left a year after I started working there and then another Filipina, a young woman, was brought to work at the house. The new woman was paid KD60 when I received only KD50. There was no difference in the work that we did, in fact we [Indian workers] do a lot more work.

Aruna had discussed the issue of wages with her new Filipina co-worker. "I asked the Filipina girl why they are paid more. She said their embassy insists on it. They say we are paid less because of our embassy. It is because your embassy is no good, they say, that is why they do not pay you". Aware of the injustice, Aruna said that her employer's refusal to raise her salary was one of the reasons for her dissatisfaction with the job.

Her employer had helped her by paying all the expenses when Aruna's daughter was in hospital for six months, with serious injuries after a road accident. But relations between them became strained, when the employer started to get suspicious that the workers were shirking work. Being employed herself, the employer was not at home to supervise work. Aruna noticed her stuffing wastepaper into crevices in crockery and other places to test the workers. Irked by this behaviour, she eventually decided to quit. Aruna said, "I had enough of her behaviour. We are not their slaves."

Her employer tried to persuade her to continue but failed and recruited a new worker, a woman from AP. Underlining the delicate nature of her job, Aruna pointed out that her employer had complained to her that the new worker did not wake up when the child needed attention at night. At the time of the interview, Aruna was employed in Saudi Arabia and had only recently returned to work for the household after her first vacation at home. She had started working for the family at a salary of INR22,000 a month and was promised that she would receive the equivalent of INR25,000, when she returned after her vacation. However, she said her employer was dragging her feet on the issue.

6.7.2 Dhanlakshmi

In June 2019, Dhanlakshmi was at home in East Godavari on her second vacation, in a regular job with an Arab family in Kuwait that she had held for the past five years. She obtained her first overseas job in Dubai, in 2007, but it lasted only a year. Her six-year-old daughter found it difficult to cope in her absence and Dhanlakshmi, who was under considerable stress at this time, developed excessive menstrual bleeding. Two years later she obtained a job in Kuwait. She returned home after a year to take care of her ailing father. Her father died but she did not return to her old employers. In 2014 Dhanlakshmi obtained a new job in Kuwait.

Dhanlakshmi's narrative takes us further in understanding the issue of comparative wages. At the time of the interview, Dhanlakshmi had forged affectionate ties with her employer's family in Kuwait but she was also agitated that they paid her less than her Filipina co-workers. Like Aruna, she also believed that her employer had entrusted her with greater responsibility than her Filipina co-workers. She pointed out that the family relied on her when there were additional demands for work. "Even when they have other families staying with them, Mama asks me to attend to them. They do not call the Filipina women. I feel very unhappy that they are using me for all this, but that they are not willing to increase my salary".

> "Mama and Baba are very affectionate … There are four children, three daughters and a son. The children are also very affectionate. They used to teach me how to conduct myself when we go out to other people's homes. They are very friendly. When I was leaving, Mama hugged me and cried, the children also cried. They are good and affectionate, but they are not willing to increase my salary".

She was deputed to work for her mama's parents (mama is a female employer) on occasions when they needed help. Three years ago, her employer's mother had interceded in her favour and her salary was raised to KD110. "But now again, they are not willing to increase my salary. They will pay only KD110."

On returning to work for the family in 2017 after her first vacation, she had confronted her employer about the higher wage rates of Filipina workers. "I asked Baba why am I paid less when we do the same work. Earlier I did not know the language… Now you ask me to teach new persons who come for work. He told me that the salary package for Indians is less and that it is more for workers from the Philippines. The same work, but they are paid more." Dhanlakshmi had also spoken to women from the Philippines about the issue. "A Filipina housemaid told me that their government is very strong, 'they take care of us. When someone dies, they respond quickly, take their body back to the country. Your Indian government does not respond quickly,' she said. 'They do not act strongly.'"

Additionally, Dhanlaksmi felt isolated in her employment situation and was particularly pained that her employers refused to hire another Telugu-speaking worker.

> Even though I have worked there for five years, they [the current employer] do not employ Telugu housemaids. They engage only Filipina housemaids. I spoke about India and about Telugu housemaids so many times. They just listen. If I get a good companion from India, I can talk to them and share my feelings. They do not allow me to go out and meet my sisters or friends. That is why I am thinking of not going back to that house. During Christmas also I was unhappy, they did not allow me to go out.

She also pointed out that the employers were reluctant to let her go out of the house. She did not receive a regular day off and as she says, above, she was not even allowed to go out on Christmas, a day when Telugu-speaking women in Kuwait come together in church. Upset with her employers, Dhanlakshmi said she would quit her job if the employer did not raise her salary. "Otherwise, I will search for another job". Her relatives in Kuwait had offered to obtain a new visa for her.

6.7.3 Discussion

Notwithstanding their claims about competence, which are based on perceptions, the experiences of Aruna and Dhanlakshmi demonstrate that even equally capable Indian workers are likely to have to work on inferior terms and may be discriminated against. Differential wage rates for MWDWs according to nationality are a complex issue. There are discernible preferences for MWDWs of specific nationalities on the labour markets in the destination countries. In 2013, the monthly wages stipulated by a recruiting agency in Kuwait ranged from KD52 (US$183) for Ethiopian domestic workers to KD92 for Filipina domestic workers.[170] India's minimum wage at the time was KD60. In the early 2000s, Filipinas and Indonesians in Bahrain with some experience got BD50 per month while Sri Lankans, Indians and inexperienced Indonesians got BD40.[171] Respondents indicated that their wages were generally higher than Ethiopian workers, but significantly lower than Filipina and Indonesian workers. But those who received lower wages than Filipina or Indonesian co-workers, irrespective of their work experience, also attributed wage disparity to language skills and to the more stylish appearance of Filipina and Indonesian workers.

Labour markets for domestic workers are segmented in the Middle Eastern countries as employers on the higher rung of the economic order evince a preference for women who speak English, and Christian women, who they associate with Western values (characteristics

170 For a discussion of comparative wage rates, see International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), 2013.

171 Sabika al-Najjar, 2004: 34.

that Filipina women generally possess), whereas a section of Arab employers prefer Muslim women.[172] In the UAE, for instance, middle and upper-income households employed Filipinas and Indonesians, whereas Indian domestic workers compete with Ethiopian domestic workers, comparatively recent entrants into the labour market, for jobs in the lower income households.[173] Racial prejudices may be implicit in these preference as Filipina and Indonesian women also have paler skin tones than women from South Asia. Individual characteristics like skill and competence intersect with cultural characteristics like race and religion, producing a distinct ordering of preferences on the labour markets.

The higher wage rates of Filipina women are in part a result of their reputation as they are rated as more competent than women of other nationalities. Notably, their government's support has motivated Filipina migrant women to invest in skills and has expanded the social profile of migrant women from the Philippines. However, Sabban has underlined the collective effect of labour market rating on women according to nationality. "A college-educated foreign female domestic worker from the Philippines (in the UAE) is paid the same wage as a high school graduate or a middle school-educated Filipina, but would earn much more than a foreign female domestic worker from India, *regardless of the latter's skills*" (emphasis ours).[174] In contrast, up to the 1970s, India was the source of domestic workers for "a substantial part of the middle and upper classes in the Gulf"[175] and held jobs with elite families in Bahrain.[176]

Both Aruna's and Dhanlakshmi's narratives implicate the effects of India's emigration policy in undermining the collective position of migrant domestic workers on destination-country labour markets. India's emigration policy sought to discourage the migration of women as domestic workers and as a consequence raised the costs of migration and depressed the investment that women migrants would otherwise make in skills. These factors had a feedback effect, narrowing the social profile of emigrant domestic workers and undermining their reputation in the destination countries.

To Dhanlakshmi's poser about why she was paid less than her Filipina co-workers, her sponsor's response implied that the Philippines government is able to insist upon a higher minimum wage, despite competition from workers of other source countries. The lower minimum wage set by the Indian government reflects the lower rating of Indian women on the labour market in Kuwait, therefore, even if India prescribes a higher minimum wage, with the present labour market assessment of Indian women, it is doubtful whether it will have the desired impact.

Additionally, Aruna's and Dhanlakshmi's narratives bring to the fore the comparative perceptions of origin-country embassies that circulate in the destination countries. Ironically, the Indian government's "image" problem with being seen as an origin-country of MWDWs, had created a situation in which Indian MWDWs were not only made aware that they were paying the costs of their government's failings but also had to contend with the perception that theirs was a weak government.

Though Dhanlakshmi was confident that she would find another job with the help of her relatives in Kuwait, there was no certainty that a new job would pay her a higher salary or that she would not come to grief with a new employer for other reasons. At the time of fieldwork in June 2019, the minimum wage for Indian MWDWs in Kuwait was KD110, which was lower than the minimum wage for Filipina women of KD120. In these circumstances, Dhanlakshmi's dilemma draws attention to how India's policy had added to the vulnerability of Indian MWDWs and rendered their success fragile.

Dhanlaksmi's narrative revealed two additional aspects of how origin government policy affects women's collective labour market prospects. It showed that employers may not prefer to hire

172 For discussion of these intersecting issues that determine employer preferences see Ireland (2013: 14); Sabika al-Najjar (2004: 34); IHRC (2013: 24) and Moors et al. (2009: 153).

173 Sabban (2004: 102).

174 Sabban (2004: 95).

175 Weiner (1982: 9).

176 Sabika al-Najjar (2004).

Indian MWDWs and that they may be reluctant to provide a regular day off and allow Indian MWDWs to go out. Information asymmetry may prompt employers to prefer Filipina women because they present less uncertainty compared to Indian MWDWs, who are on average less skilled than Filipina MWDWs. This may explain why despite Dhanlakshmi's pleas her employer had refused to employ more Telugu-speaking women.

The second issue pertains to the contention by our respondents that employers impose more restrictions on Indian MWDWs than on Filipina women or Indonesians. The analysis in Section 6.5 above, for instance, showed that MWDWs rarely received a regular weekly off day, even when it was mandated by the laws in the destination countries. This also is at least partially a fall out of the passive attitude of the Indian government with respect to blue collar migrant workers. Respondent MWDWs often pointed out that unlike them, Filipina and Indonesian women co-workers were not denied off days.

6.7.4 Jyothi

The third narrative – that of Jyothi – is typical in some respect of the experience of women who are handpicked by Indian expatriates for regular full-time employment in the Middle East. Jyothi relied on a network of middle-class employers from her home town in Ernakulum to find overseas jobs. By contrast, Aruna and Dhanlakshmi had obtained visas repeatedly through recruiting agents. As pointed out in Chapter 4 above, women may opt to work for Indian expatriate employers for reasons related to personal safety, especially to avoid the risks and uncertainties associated with working with Arab sponsors. This choice meant that they are often paid significantly less than what they may expect to receive on the labour market in the destination. The discussion of Jyothi's narrative will focus on this aspect of the experience of MWDWs, but the narrative also brings into view a more general concern about how a protectionist emigration policy may reinforce pejorative perceptions of migrant domestic work in the source regions.

Over the past decade, Jyothi had worked in full-time jobs for several expatriate Malayali families. It was when her husband fell ill, more than two decades ago, that she first entered the labour market at home as an agricultural labourer. Her husband died seventeen years ago when her twin sons were five years old and her daughter was only three years old. Since then she has done many jobs, washing hospital linen and domestic work for Malayali families in her hometown and in several Indian metros, before she embarked on an overseas career in 2009.

> "I worked for two years in Hyderabad. I went to Delhi for six or seven months, then Bangalore, Chennai ... We cannot go to the Gulf until we complete 30 years. My first job was in Bahrain. I started working there at a salary of INR4,500 ... If we work at home, it will not be enough to meet any of our expenses. There is a big difference in salary here and there. Here all our expenses are taken care of and we get a full salary. That is why I don't stay at home. When I go home, I stay for a month or two at the most."

At the time of the interview in June 2019, Jyothi was employed by a Malayali family in Dubai. "From this year onwards, I am getting INR27,000. They have said they will raise it to INR30,000 in two or three months ... They are paying me double my earlier salary. They said the previous workers were not okay. I cook and take care of the children like I do in my own home." The family had gone the extra mile to expedite her journey. "They sent me INR50,000 in advance this time because I was short of money. I could not wait for a loan to come through [a loan that was in the pipeline]. For the travel expenses to the airport, they sent me money for that and to buy things also, for everything".

Jyothi's her first overseas job was in Bahrain. She obtained the job through a patient at the hospital in Ernakulum where she worked in the laundry. Since then, she had obtained new jobs successively through her network of middle-class employers. Her overseas career was punctuated with a long break at home to build a house during which time she worked for a local family for INR250 a day. After this she spent six years working successively for the families of two Malayali doctors in Kuwait. Her salary went up from INR5,000 at the start to INR14,000. She had gone back to Kuwait in 2017 and worked for seven months when she earned INR14,500 a month.

Jyothi believed that her employers had appreciated her services. "When I am going home, my employers have spent money to buy things for my family. All these years I have spent nothing. All the families have given me money

when I was going home. We stay and work for them so they show us that kind of affection and gratitude." However, the domestic workers' routine for expatriate families was exacting.

> "In any house we go to, it is not possible to take any rest. If there are small children, we have be on our toes all the time. When the employer comes home, we have to give them food. There are no fixed timings. There is a small child in the house I am working in now in Dubai. I am constantly working because the child will not go to anyone else. We may have to work day and night".

Jyothi's overseas jobs had been crucial for her family to escape destitution and her earnings had laid the foundations for her children's education. Her twin sons were information technology graduates and had started working for "big" companies. In these circumstances, she refers to the demeaning status of paid domestic work.

> They find it difficult when their friends learn that their mother is going for housework. They are working in a big company. Their friends ask why is your mother not at home. My sons have said that after another two years, "Amma, you should not go for housework." That is my children's order. But because of this work, I have benefited a lot. I have been able to educate the children. I have sent my daughter for BSc nursing. I have built a house. I have taken care of all my responsibilities. I have paid off my debts.

6.7.5 Discussion

Jyothi's salary in Bahrain and Kuwait are comparable to the lower-end of salaries paid by Arab families to Indian domestic workers in the sample. To take some examples, Tracy earned the equivalent of INR6,500 in a regular full-time job in Bahrain in 2007 (the year she obtained a free visa and moved out); Beena who started working in 1997 for a family in Kuwait for the equivalent of INR5,000, earned the equivalent of INR18,000 in 2012. However, salaries of first-time workers could be considerably lower than that of more experienced workers. In 2011, when she took up her first overseas job, Rajamma was paid INR4,000 by a Kuwaiti family, but they doubled her salary in the second year and promised to raise it further if she returned to work for them. She was unable to migrate again because of lack of support for childcare at her home in Kadapa. But a section of women earned salaries as low as INR4,500 with Arab employers even in 2012–13.

Even as Jyothi's salary nearly doubled, when she moved to Dubai in May 2019, she earned about the same as several respondents who were in full-time employment with Arab sponsors. At the time of the interview, her salary was on par with or at best slightly more than the minimum wage prescribed by the Indian government, which is roughly equivalent to INR26,000. It is apparent that Jyothi had been underpaid in her earlier job.

In Chapter 3, I have described how married women may be prevented from migrating because of stigma arising from the male-breadwinner norm. Aruna, for instance, had to first overcome resistance from her husband in order to migrate. Jyothi migrated only after her husband died and did so with an expatriate family. Her migration was in circumstances that were considered more acceptable in the source regions. Despite this, her sons, who owe their education and jobs as IT professionals to her labour of love, are embarrassed that their mother is employed as a migrant domestic worker. Paid domestic work is generally subject to pejorative perceptions in Kerala, but Jyothi's narrative draws attention to a subtle distinction between paid domestic work at home and migrant domestic work. A woman's prolonged absence from the home makes migrant domestic work all too visible and, therefore, difficult to be evasive about or to disguise before her children's friends.

India's refusal to pursue an open emigration policy has reinforced derogatory perceptions of MWDWs, which, as observed in Chapter 3 above, could be one of the reasons for why MWDWs from Kerala are relatively older women, who either started migrating early and continued to do so or start migration when they are relatively older.[177] Oishi points out that after Sri Lanka adopted an open policy towards the migration

177 In the light of the above discussion, it is at least partly a measure of the strength of India networks and connection in the Middle East as well as the enterprise of its women workers that wage rates of Indian and Sri Lankan women in the Middle East are similar. It could also be on account of the way race operates on the labour market to differentiate Filipina and Indonesian workers from South Asian workers.

of women domestic workers in the 1980s, the social base of migrant women from Sri Lanka expanded and reduced the stigma on them.[178] The social base of migrant women from India has remained narrow, lowering the skill profile of migrant women and their expected wages and strengthening stigma.

Notably, in her narrative above, Jyothi does not endorse, uncritically, the derogatory status of paid domestic work. On the contrary, she is emphatic about the benefits of overseas employment. In saying that her sons have "ordered" her to stop working once they are able to support her, she conveys a measure of pride about what she had achieved even as she goes on to emphasize her sense of indebtedness to her work. Going further, Jyothi invests paid domestic work with the dignity it is usually denied. The description of the gifts her employers had given her as a measure of their gratitude to her for her services as a domestic worker disrupts the clichéd equation in which domestic workers are expected to be grateful for "handouts", whereas employers, who extend them are seen as "charitable" and "generous". Jyothi's words transform the gifts given by her employers into a form of reciprocity, which grants dignity to the exchange and positions her as an equal.

To summarize the discussion in Section 6.8, the women whose narratives were discussed in the section did not conform to the dominant representations of MWDWs. They had been relatively successful, thus far at least. Keenly aware of the value of their work, they had questioned their employers about unequal wages for similar if not more valuable work and they also sought to endow their work with dignity. But the analysis of their narratives exposed the spiralling consequences of an illiberal emigration policy, which had undermined their collective prospects on the labour markets in the destination countries. Emigration policy had reduced the bargaining power of individual women and had determined trade offs that reduced women's potential to secure better earnings.

A lower minimum wage and lower comparative wages reflected the weak position of Indian women on the labour market. The Indian government has failed to recognize this, even as women's own perspectives have remained conspicuously absent from the policy-making process. In this context, India's emigration policy had strengthened the hands of overseas employers to demand more work for less pay and had rendered women's success fragile and contingent excessively on their individual resources and social networks.

178 Oishi (2005: 160). The typical migrant domestic worker from Sri Lanka before the country embarked on a liberal migration policy was "an older married woman with limited education and a compelling need to support her family".

7. In the Shadow of the State

India has witnessed steady outflows of MWDWs to the Middle East (especially if we account for spatial clustering to a few source regions in South India) and remains among the leading origin countries of MWDWs in some of the destination countries. An important reason for the uninterrupted mobility of MWDWs from India is the rich social networks and personal connections binding the source regions of migration in the country with the destination countries. MWDWs in the source regions continue to look to overseas employment to pursue their hopes and aspirations for a better life but the Indian state has adopted an increasingly protectionist emigration policy and has failed to extend support to MWDWs to pursue legal remedies against abusive employers. Lacking the collective power to challenge government policy and its patriarchal and nationalist premises, MWDWs have pursued migration in the long shadow of the state, defying emigration rules and forging complex ties with a variety of migration intermediaries.

While the implementation of emigration restrictions against MWDWs was relatively lax in previous years, the Indian government became increasingly strict in enforcing these restrictions since the 2000s. At present, India's emigration rules permit only a narrow window for legal emigration of women as domestic workers. Under the current rules, MWDWs must be recruited exclusively by the government-designated public sector agencies or directly by foreign employers through the online eMigrate system. These rules have found little favour with aspiring women migrants in the source regions of Kerala and AP.

This paper sought to contextualize the steady outflows of MWDWs from India since the mid-twentieth century with reference to the Indian government's protectionist emigration policy on the one hand and the strong connections between the sending and receiving contexts on the other. The networks and connections between source regions and destination countries explain not only the continued migration of MWDWs but also the spatial clustering of migrants in specific regions of South India. The discussion in the foregoing chapters sought to place women's migration in the existing legal and social contexts in India and brought into view women's multiple and layered experiences of recruitment, migration and overseas employment while also drawing attention to the gap between the policy perspective and the views of MWDWs.

There is little rigorous investigation of women's migration from India from the perspectives of the source regions. This paper sought to remedy this lacuna with analysis of material generated through fieldwork in four source regions in South India. This research material made it possible to probe how the social, economic and cultural contexts affect recruitment and migration of women as domestic workers. The paper was organized around three broad sets of questions:

A: What are the socio-economic, demographic and other characteristics of women domestic workers migrating to the Middle East and what do these tell us about women's aspirations, and the ways in which they mobilize resources and identities in order to be able to migrate?

B: How do women obtain visas and travel in the shadow of the state? Is their mobility the result of disorderly random processes at work or does it involve regular mobility as well as forms of organized transgression?

C: Which are the key destinations of migrant women from the source regions and how can flows to these destinations be explained?

In addition to these questions, the research also probed how the changes in emigration regulations since 2014 had affected the migration of women as domestic workers. Had the tightening of regulations altered the manner in which migrant women were recruited and travelled to overseas destinations? Had it altered the pattern of migration between source regions and destinations countries? While these were not questions that could be answered in any conclusive way, the interviews conducted in May–June 2019, when read alongside emigration clearance data and news reports about migration, provided some indications of how women migrants and migration intermediaries

were responding to the recent regulatory changes.

In presenting the narratives of women migrants, it was impossible to exclude a flavour of their varied experiences of overseas employment. Because of the way some recruiters dupe MWDWs, place them in precarious jobs and are complicit with abusive employers, women's varied experiences of recruitment also allowed us to engage critically with the generalized perceptions of private recruiting agents. The fieldwork included interactions with a diverse set of intermediaries who assisted MWDWs. The engagement with recruitment and mobility practices has been largely "bottom up", i.e., through the perspectives of women migrant workers, though a small number of intermediaries were interviewed in both AP and Kerala.

The paper underscores the significance of the source contexts in defining the meanings and motivations of women's migration. There were sharp differences in the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of women migrants from Kerala and AP. Not surprisingly, MWDWs were dominantly from the disadvantaged social groups, the SCs and OBCs, and only rarely from the privileged castes. Further, while SC women comprised almost half of the MWDWs from AP, MWDWs from Kerala were largely from the OBCs and it was apparent that unlike in AP, SC women from Kerala lacked the networks and connections that migration is premised on. MWDWs from Kerala were significantly better off than their counterparts from AP in terms of basic developmental characteristics i.e., literacy and age at marriage, but the overall picture was more nuanced. Migration (and migrants) from Kerala may be ageing, whereas in AP it may have gained momentum in recent decades. A disproportionate presence of widows, separated, and divorced women among MWDWs from Kerala contrasted sharply with the mostly currently married status of MWDWs from AP. Hence, it was apparent that despite their higher literacy, MWDWs from Kerala were marked by a distinct form of social disadvantage.

Further, a comparative analysis showed that the social profile of MWDWs from AP was more similar to all women from AP whereas the social profile of MWDWs from Kerala were very different from that of all women from Kerala. This suggested that MWDWs from Kerala are drawn from the social margins whereas in AP they are more mainstream. An analysis of decision-making within migrant families with the help of both quantitative and qualitative data substantiated the above finding. It also showed that the MWDWs from Kerala migrated against the tide of social norms and opinions whereas with the exception of women from the privileged castes, the MWDWs from AP faced little or no resistance within their families and communities for their migration plans.

Analysis of the financing of the costs of migration revealed that MWDWs from AP started out from a position of greater economic vulnerability but their position improved substantially over the course of migration, whereas women from Kerala started out from a position of less vulnerability but there was much less improvement in their position. An important aspect here is the stigma associated with migrant domestic work in Kerala, which subjected MWDWs from the state to derogatory perceptions and relegated increasing migration to the choice of women on the social margins. The resulting insight is that the marginal gains from migration were considerably greater for women from AP, which was partly because they started from a worse position than women from Kerala. It also suggests that women's migration from AP is more aspirational and forward-looking.

The second major theme was informal intermediation, which, especially in the face of an adverse emigration policy, has been a key factor in sustaining the migration of women as domestic workers from the source regions in AP and Kerala. Alarmist reportage of the exploitation of MWDWs by recruitment agents has led to public outrage and skewed the response of policy makers, lending credibility to victim narratives and vilifying private recruiters en masse. The absence of scholarly engagement with the routine processes of recruitment at the local level in the source regions has led to a poor understanding of why women choose to seek the services of private recruiters and the nature of information that aspiring women migrants possess. In this context, the study draws attention to the diversity of private intermediaries, the dispersed processes of intermediation as well as the complex intertwining of the interests of intermediaries and MWDWs in the sending areas.

Two aspects of the legal framework have shaped the types of intermediaries and the nature of intermediation in fundamental ways. First, the Emigration Act, 1983, created an impasse by denying legal recognition to the vast majority of intermediaries who were involved in recruiting MWDWs. The large recruitment agencies, which were able to obtain licenses, did not have the outreach necessary to mobilize candidates from far-flung source areas. The intermediaries who had connections in the source areas were rarely in a position to obtain a license but they also had too much at stake in recruitment to abandon their occupation altogether. Therefore, the impasse was resolved, informally, through the accommodation of irregular recruitment. Second, regulatory interventions within the framework of the Act of 1983, mostly through government orders, along with the construction of migration of women domestic workers as a social problem, have curtailed legitimate space for private recruitment of women in the ECR category. These two factors generated incentives for even registered private recruitment agencies to adopt irregular methods in order to avoid accountability. These factors also provided little other option for MWDWs than to seek the services of unauthorized intermediaries.

From the perspective of migrant women, private intermediaries are a vital resource. Most MWDWs in the sample surveyed for the study had availed of the services of private intermediaries at some point in their migration trajectories. Even when visas were obtained directly from close relatives in the destination, the services of brokers were often unavoidable to obtain emigration clearance and/or make arrangements for travel. In contrast to public sector recruitment agencies, local intermediaries are dispersed, absurdly easy to access and well-organized in facilitating migration from the sending areas in AP and Kerala. For instance, the analysis in Chapter 3 showed that the minimum age of 30 years as a condition for the migration of women as domestic workers had been flouted rampantly. This was possible only with proactive assistance from private intermediaries acting in association with rent-seeking government officials.

Migration intermediaries are a heterogeneous group with a multiplicity of actors ranging from close relatives, friends and acquaintances to local shopkeepers and drivers, visa traders, commission agents, travel agents and recruitment agencies located in the metros and big towns. There was also a considerable blurring of the boundaries between social networks and commercial intermediaries as social networks also extracted money from migrant workers. Among the main suppliers of visas to MWDWs were social networks, travel agencies, informal recruiting networks and individual suppliers with personal contacts in the destination. The footprint of registered recruitment agencies was not explicit, but their presence in this sector could not be ruled out, despite claims to the contrary by their representatives in the source regions.

Analysis of women's narratives showed that recruitment is a fragmented process that involves the coming together of multiple actors, who provide a variety of differentiated services and multiple paths of migration. Women could migrate through a chain of intermediaries or a single intermediary who connected them to their employers in the destination. They could migrate with the help of small local recruiting networks with actors on both sides of the border, and with or without emigration clearance. Local intermediaries played an especially important part in mobilizing candidates from the source villages and seeing them through the process of emigration.

Private intermediaries were eager to offer their services and proactive in recruiting women and assisting them in migration. Once MWDWs reached the destination, some of the intermediaries was more responsive to their complaints than others. However, it was repeatedly observed that small informal recruiting networks of local people that operated on both sides of the border turned hostile when women complained of difficulties at the destination. These networks extracted large sums from workers and/or from their sponsors as an advance on the salaries of workers and were not only complicit with abusive sponsors but had also subjected workers to physical violence to force them to submit to the demands of their employers.

The major destinations of migrant domestic workers correspond to the stock of connections forged in the early decades by previous migrants and by the recruiting industry. Kuwait was the single largest destination of women from three of the four fieldwork sites – Trivandrum, East Godavari and Kadapa, but the extent of migration from these sites varied. Only women

from Malappuram went mostly to the UAE followed by Saudi Arabia. Kuwait government sources show that women domestic workers from India are second only to the Philippines in the composition of total MWDWs in that country. Oman and the UAE have also been prominent destinations. Migration to Saudi Arabia since at least the 1980s was concentrated in Malappuram and Kadapa.

The experiences of MWDWs in overseas employment challenges prevalent stereotypes not only of intermediaries as exploitative but also of Arab sponsors as abusive and Indian expatriate employers as essentially benign. As discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.3), it is telling that policymakers or state officials may be sympathetic to the migration of domestic workers when they view it through the lens (and needs) of expatriate Indian employers in the Middle East, even as they remain suspicious of the aspirations of MWDWs. The ties between employers and workers were complex and nuanced. Irrespective of nationality, employers ranged from those who drew upon fictive kinship and patronage to cement ties of intimacy with workers, to those who were highly exacting and abusive.

There were also distinctions according to the type of employment. Domestic workers had greater space to spell out the terms of employment in part-time jobs as compared to full-time live-in jobs, and were in greater control over their circumstances, when they worked on the informal market on their own visas (free visas). But the preference of MWDWs for jobs on the informal market versus regular full time employment with the sponsor depended on their risk aversion and how well they believed they could manage the risk associated with jobs on the informal market.

Irrespective of whether women migrated in a regular way or not, the risks associated with migration were managed substantially with the help of social networks and personal connections in the destination. It is pertinent here that the Indian government was not perceived as helpful, and women approached the Indian embassy usually only when other avenues had failed, and they wanted to return home at any cost.

In the absence of social networks in the destination, women were highly dependent on their recruiting agents and/or their employers for survival. The logic underpinning India's emigration policy that the exploitation of MWDWs can be addressed by eliminating private intermediation is oblivious to this larger reality of recruitment. However, the roots of systemic failure are firmly embedded in the social framework in India. India's emigration policy has evolved as a response to the overarching representation of MWDWs as victims. Reports of abuse and harassment in overseas employment stoke patriarchal and nationalist outrage. Importantly, however, the abuse of "low-skilled" women is represented not as a labour rights violation but as "spoiling" the "image" of the nation (here the nation is constructed implicitly as privileged caste and middle-class).

Not surprisingly, a patronizing policy regime has failed to resonate with the perspectives and experiences of MWDWs and translated into a yawning social distance between MWDWs and government officials and public sector recruitment agencies. The government's stilted approach towards "low-skilled" migrant women became more explicit recently when it allowed tie-ups with destination countries that were facing shortages of MWDWs. There are some indications that Saudi Arabia and Kuwait may have leveraged their substantial business clout with India to pave the way for those tie ups and to open the doors for the migration of women as domestic workers to address shortages in their countries. It is pertinent here to ask whether the Indian government has sought to protect the interests of big businesses by trading off what it has hitherto professed to be the interests of "low-skilled" women workers.

However, the harassment and abuse of MWDWs is a systemic problem in the Middle East and sponsors are rarely punished for even heinous crime against migrant workers. For this reason, the ECR mechanism is largely irrelevant once migrant workers arrive in the Middle East. One of the assumptions underpinning emigration clearance for ECR category women workers is that women above the age of 30 migrating with valid employment contracts will somehow be safer in the destination countries, in other words that younger women are more vulnerable to exploitation. These assumptions arise from

conservative gender premises and are clearly disconnected from the reality of migration.[179]

Making matters worse for Indian MWDWs, long-term protectionism has undermined their position on the labour markets in the destination countries. The analysis of narratives of relatively successful MWDWs showed that it was difficult for them to claim parity in salaries with Filipina women, even when they may do work of equal worth or are entrusted greater responsibility. Indian MWDWs are also at a disadvantage because of information asymmetry, which leads employers of higher economic standing to employ Filipina or Indonesian women, who are perceived as more skilled than Indian women.

Further, because of Indian MWDWs' low rating on the labour market, employers also find it easy to impose greater restrictions on them compared to their Filipina or Indonesian counterparts. Employers routinely deny Indian MWDWs in full-time, live-in employment the provision of a weekly day off or the right to go out of the house. In these circumstances, Indian MWDWs were largely left to their own devices to extricate themselves from difficult situations or to claim just compensation as well as respect and dignity for their work.

Needless to say, the progressive stifling of regular channels of mobility since 2011 shows that the Indian government has refused to recognize the aspirations of migrant domestic workers and grant them legitimate space to migrate. The subsequent shift to public sector recruitment has further reduced regular outflows, even as women flout the rules through new manipulations engineered by intermediaries. In the present context of scarcity of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, there is greater ease of availability of visas and women are no longer being made to pay for their migration costs. Interestingly, this latter change has begun to expose a fundamental problem with the migration and sponsorship system in the Middle East. Workers have described a sense of entitlement that sponsors assert over them on account of having paid for their recruitment. The recent trend has led recruiting agents to forcefully confine women migrants who insisted on returning home before the completion of their contracts, and to extort money from them to compensate for the loss that would otherwise need to be borne by the recruiters.

The present ban on private intermediaries has not dented their ability to recruit women. Older practices such as pushing and the use of visit visas may have gained importance but intermediaries also disguise work visas as visit visas to enable women who had obtained work visas to evade emigration check at the airports. However, it would be naïve to attribute women's continued mobility to the proactive nature of brokerage alone. Migration is spurred by women's awareness and desire for overseas jobs and their aspirations for a better life. In this light, the abuses suffered by a section of MWDWs must be seen in association with the systems of governance both in the Middle East and India, which generate conditions that deprive MWDWs of control over their circumstances.

It may seem puzzling that women continue to migrate through irregular channels, while a public sector agency like NORKA has faced an uphill task to mobilise recruits to meet the demand from Al Durra. The analysis in this paper suggests that NORKA may need to bridge the social distance between government agencies and migrant women. By contrast, local intermediaries share similar social circumstances with potential migrants and are able to inspire trust. Women's migration is spurred awareness of overseas employment opportunities and the desire to earn higher incomes. In this context, transgressions by women migrants should not be seen as random acts of naivety or avarice. Rather, they may signal the collective disenchantment of MWDWs with the discriminatory migration policy of the Indian state.

Needless to say, the aspirations of MWDWs and the choices they make deserve to be taken seriously and policy makers must seek to have a better understanding of migrant women's perspectives, aspirations and the decision-making process within their families. Existing regulations by the Indian government infringe on women's rights to mobility and treat "low-skilled" women as lesser citizens. Indeed, by adopting a protectionist approach to ECR-category women's migration and failing to extend possible support (of the kind that origin countries like the Philippines or Sri Lanka have been providing to

179 For a detailed discussion of these premises, see Kodoth and Varghese (2012)

their women migrants), India has damaged the labour market prospects of its MWDWs in the Middle Eastern countries and has aggravated the vulnerability of these women to exploitation by private intermediaries and overseas employers. In the destination countries, the inferior position of Indian MWDWs is seen by other MWDWs as a reflection of the failings of the Indian government. Ironically then, the concern of the Indian government and the middle-class citizen with India's "image" abroad may have backfired portraying India in poor light and leading to the perception that the Indian government is weak.

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Work in Freedom

Work in Freedom is an integrated development cooperation programme aiming to reduce vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour of women migrating to garment and domestic work. The programme works along migration pathways in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon and some of Gulf countries. Interventions focus on promoting mobility by choice, fair recruitment to decent jobs, and safety and dignity for migrant workers.

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