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Nasra M. Shah

In this paper, I provide an overview of the labour market position of women migrants in the Gulf. Over the last 30 years women, especially from Asian countries, have become an increasingly important component of this market. Female contribution to the economy of some sending countries such as Sri Lanka exceeds that of males. A majority of Asian women are employed as domestic workers. This dialogue piece provides a brief description of the number and composition of female migrants and discusses the policies of sending countries that attempt to influence such migration.

In the late 1990s, the six oil-rich Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) had a total population of 27.7 million, of which temporary migrant workers and their families constituted about 10.6 million. About three-fourths of all expatriate residents were participating in the Gulf labour force. Among these 7.4 million workers, about 840,000 (11.4%) were women. The tendency towards 'Asianisation' of the Gulf labour forces has increased over time, despite policies encouraging migration of Arab nationals in some of the receiving countries.

A majority of the migrant women workers in the Gulf are from Sri Lanka, Philippines, India, and Indonesia. A smaller percentage comes from Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, etc. The gender breakdown of migrants originating from various countries is markedly different. In case of some countries such as Sri Lanka, women constitute the majority (65%) of migrant workers while in the Philippines they constitute about half. In 1999, Sri Lanka had about 583,000 female workers employed in many different countries who were making a very major contribution to the foreign exchange earnings of the country. Other countries in the Asian subcontinent, such as India and Bangladesh, have fewer female domestic workers in the Gulf while Pakistan has almost no such workers.

Among the Arabs, there seems to be a greater tendency towards family migration whereby the husband is able to bring his wife and children with him. In the case of Asian workers, who have come to constitute an increasingly larger proportion of all expatriate workers in the Gulf, women and men typically migrate without the spouse and children. Receiving countries in the Gulf have rules prescribing a minimum salary below which a migrant worker is not allowed to bring his/her family. A majority of Asian workers usually earn

less than this minimum salary. Evidence of family migration is also provided by the higher rates of labour force participation among Asian compared to Arab women. Among the Arabs in Kuwait in 2001, for example, only 12% of the total female migrants were in the labor force while the rest were accompanying a male migrant worker. In the case of Asians, on the other hand, 77% of all women were in Kuwait because they were employed there.

The nature of work that the migrant women from Asia are concentrated in provides a major explanation for individual rather than family migration. As illustrated by data from Kuwait, almost 90% of all Asian migrant women are employed in the service sector, primarily as domestic workers. In contrast, only 10% of the employed Arab women are working in this sector. A large majority of the Arab women are employed as teachers, physicians, nurses, or clerical workers. In numerical terms, about 20,000 Arab and 16,000 Asian women were employed in professional and clerical occupations. Domestic work does not provide enough salary nor the necessary permission or visas to bring the family. Furthermore, the domestic workers are almost always live-in helpers where employers provide room and board that is sufficient only for the worker. Domestic workers in the Gulf also include a minority of males who are usually employed as drivers, gardeners, and general helpers.

In surveys that have addressed the female domestic worker's satisfaction with the employment experience, a majority stated that it was good and rewarding. Compared to the home country they are usually paid a relatively high salary (usually about 100–150 US\$ per month). However, a minority of women employed as domestic workers do suffer different types of abuse due to unfair labour conditions. They work in an environment of relative isolation and lower level of social support networks resulting in psychological isolation. Cases of sexual harassment and abuse are often reported in the press. However, no objective or reliable data are available on the percentage of women who are actually subjected to sexual abuse or rape. In cases where a disagreement occurs between the employer and the domestic workers, delay or withholding of salary is often a major reason. Other complaints may include excessive workloads and lack of holidays, inadequacy of food or accommodation, or general mistreatment. Female domestic workers from several countries have been seeking shelter in their embassies as a result of maltreatment or abuse. In Kuwait, for example, 400 Sri Lankan, 80 Indian, and 80 Filipino women (primarily domestic workers) had sought refuge at their embassies in 1996.

policies

Governments of countries of origin have been especially concerned about the protection of female migrant workers, since this is politically and morally a very

sensitive issue. To avoid the exploitation of women workers, several restrictions have been imposed by various sending countries. A policy of restricting the migration of female workers below a specified age exists in India, Indonesia, and Pakistan. Female migration, especially of domestic servants, from Pakistan has been almost non-existent. During the last few years, Bangladesh has introduced a rule restricting overseas employment as domestic workers to those women who are accompanied by their husband. Sri Lanka has imposed no restrictions on the migration of female domestic workers, but has placed a ban on the migration of nurses.

Government restrictions on female migration, however, have been found to be quite ineffective in those countries where there is a ready supply of workers willing to migrate overseas. In most countries where women constitute large proportions of the outflow of migrant workers, the restrictions are more symbolic than real. Authorities in the Philippines and Thailand have found ways of exempting many employment categories of women from prohibition. India has tried to limit and regulate the migration of female domestic workers, unsuccessfully. In the receiving countries, domestic workers are not covered by labour laws since they are employed in private homes and not in companies that may be regulated.

To conclude, migrant working women constitute about 11% of all labour migrants in the Gulf. A majority of females, especially from Asia, are employed in low paying domestic work. Such workers make a large contribution to the income of individual households and the country. There is a need to enhance the protective efforts currently in place in the sending as well as receiving countries.

author biography

Nasra M. Shah is Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Community Medicine at Kuwait University. She is a demographer by training. She has written extensively on various aspects of migration to the Middle East, especially from South Asian countries. Her other research interests include fertility and family planning, changing roles of women in society, aging, and socioeconomic factors in health in developing countries.

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