

The Reality Behind the Global Care Chain: The Case of South Indian Emigrant Domestic Workers

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The Global Care Chain

There has been a considerable volume of research in the past two decades on the migration of domestic workers from the global south to the more affluent countries. This has drawn attention to the growing incorporation of paid housework into global political economy and highlighted power asymmetries between nations. High or rising work participation rates of women and demographic ageing has resulted in a deficit of care providers in the global north and has been attracting migrant workers from the global south. Drawing on Rachel Parrenas' (2012) research on migrant Filipina domestic workers in the West, Arlie Hochschild formulated the concept of the Global Care Chain (GCC) to show how employers extract surplus value from migrant care workers and how migration depletes care provision at the source. Parrenas observed that migration produces a hierarchical chain of reproductive labour as kin networks of migrant women or low paid labour take over these migrant women's work in their own homes in the global south. Isaksen, Devi and Hochschild (2008) argue that employers in the global north do not compensate migrant workers fully for their labour because part of the costs of employing them are 'externalised', i.e., because the care work previously done by migrant workers in their own homes is now

replaced by unpaid work of women from their kinship networks or poorly paid women workers. In other words, these costs are rendered invisible and not fully monetised in effect providing a hidden subsidy to employers in the north.

The term *care* has been used to denote the wide spectrum of tasks that involves the upkeep of the human body as well as the cultivation of health and human capabilities. These include two broad categories of tasks, the more valorised tasks related to nurture and the more frequently outsourced and devalorised, menial tasks of cleaning. In accordance with this hierarchy of tasks in the global north, migrant workers and women of colour are engaged predominantly in the menial tasks of cleaning. The GCC analysis brought the spotlight on the reinforcement of global inequalities of well being, wealth and power; it has been extended to care workers in diverse settings and to the multiple actors who constitute the chain, i.e., the migration industry and source and destination governments. On the other hand, the GCC analysis has been critiqued for essentializing gender and reifying the notion of women as care workers (Yeates, 2012, Parrenas, 2012, Nadasen, 2017). Another problem with the framework is that as England (2006) observed, 'what is unique about migration is not doing care work or leaving children behind'.

Migration of workers who were once care providers in their own families disrupts care arrangements in the global south, irrespective of their occupation at the destination.

GCC analysis has focussed on migration from countries like the Philippines which have adopted a liberal approach to the migration of domestic workers. India is a major source of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to parts of the Middle East but has traditionally adopted a protectionist approach to their migration. There is now a rising demand for MDWs in the Middle East spurred by increased work participation rates of women nationals as a result of policies of nationalisation of the workforce that seek to reduce the employment of migrant workers by corporations and the government and by the progress of ageing (Tayah and Assaf, 2018).

The Middle East is also distinct for the Kafala system of sponsorship and recruitment which relegates immigrants to permanently temporary resident status. In addition to this, MDWs are excluded from the purview of labour laws in the Middle East as they work in households. At the source, in India, the embedding of the migration of domestic workers in patriarchal power relations diminishes the value of migrant women's labour. In broad brush strokes, and drawing on my own research (Kodoth 2020), I sketch out here briefly how India's migration policy is complicit in accumulation strategies of overseas employers, the recruitment industry and other business interests straddling India and the Middle East.

This short paper shows how conditions at the source and destination of Migrant Domestic Workers exhibit a complexity that goes beyond the abstract universal model of the Global Care Chain.

The Kafala System and Indian policy: Effects at the destination

The possibilities of extraction of labour from MDWs in the Middle East are framed by the Kafala system, which ties the residence permit of MDWs to their sponsor. The system does not permit MDWs to change jobs without the sponsors' consent but allows the sponsor to send the worker back home at will. This reduces MDWs to abject dependence on their sponsors. The system mandates that sponsors must pay the recruitment and travel expenses of migrant workers but this provision rarely

benefits MDWs as it is misappropriated by intermediaries at different levels of the migration chain. But because sponsors pay to bring workers to the destination, they internalise a sense of entitlement over migrant workers, which translates into a motive to confine workers and to extract labour. Sponsors routinely confiscate the passports of workers though it is proscribed by the law and prevent MDWs from meeting and speaking to other people. This behaviour may be driven by the urge to protect their investment against the risk of the worker escaping or insisting on returning home.

However, MDWs also pay large sums of money as expenses of migration because the money paid by the sponsors is siphoned off by intermediaries. In this context, MDWs may tolerate abusive behaviour by their sponsors in order to avoid being sent back home or flee from abusive employers and seek other opportunities as undocumented workers. MDWs from South India have rich informal networks in the Middle East which they use to find alternate if irregular employment but in such situations they are also heavily dependent on informal networks to avoid detection and deportation.

At the source end of the chain, the emphasis of India's official policy, until recently was on restricting the migration of domestic workers supposedly to protect them from exploitation. Combined with the failure of policymakers to recognise the importance of interventions to protect workers' rights in the destination, a policy of restrictions created conditions that were more conducive to exploitation of MDWs. Restrictions diverted aspirants to irregular channels, raised the financial costs of migration and reduced returns. Lower returns have reduced the incentive to invest in skills (because the returns are not commensurate with higher skills) but has also limited migration to poorly qualified workers - a very large section of MDWs from Andhra Pradesh are not literate and those from Kerala have but a few years of schooling. Restrictions had a spiralling effect, diminishing the labour market prospects of Indian MDWs in destination countries. At present, irrespective of Indian women's competence or work load, sponsors are able to pay them less compared to women from countries like the Philippines, who have a higher rating on the labour market. In addition, the Indian government's reluctance to intervene to protect the rights of

MDWs in the destination countries has created a vacuum that has been filled by informal networks but these networks are known to extract payments in cash or kind, including sexual favours from domestic workers.

It is not entirely surprising that India's migration policy has been complicit in accumulation strategies of overseas employers and migration intermediaries since the voices of MDWs have been conspicuous by their absence in the policy making process. The past two decades have witnessed intensification of restrictions on the mobility of MDWs in response to dominant patriarchal and nationalist ideologies implicit in adverse public opinion. Such a discourse constructs the abuse of MDWs not as a violation of labour rights but as a blot on the image of the nation.

Shifts in India's emigration policy since 2014, however, bring into sharp relief the complicity of the Indian state in accumulation strategies of Capital across India and the Middle East. India has moved from outright protectionism to a more ambiguous policy stance that seeks to accommodate the demands of the destination countries for increased migration of domestic workers. Since 2014, India has signed domestic workers' mobility instruments with several Middle Eastern countries. Previously, officials of public sector agencies maintained that recruiting domestic workers for overseas markets would damage their 'image' but in a dramatic reversal of this position, since 2018 public sector agencies in Kerala, AP and Telangana have commenced organised recruitment of domestic workers to Kuwait.

India has substantial business interests in the Middle East, where countries have sought to leverage their business clout in veiled and sometimes overt ways. For instance, Saudi Arabian authorities insist that Indian recruiters of all kinds of workers will be issued contracts only if they agreed to supply domestic workers as a part of these contracts. Under pressure to accommodate these demands, which also implicate the interests of Indian business lobbies, the Indian government has reduced MDWs to mere pawns on the negotiation table. It is instructive that policy makers hear the demands of destination states and business lobbies but not those of MDWs who have been seeking greater ease of mobility along with

better protection of their rights at home and in the destination.

Social disruption at the source

The GCC framework universalises the concept of care and the notion of the family rooted in the modern histories of the global north. Such a universalization fails to take account of the infrastructural and sociopolitical context of care provision established by the state, markets and communities in the south (Raghuram, 2012).

Analysing the migration of women health workers from Kerala to the Middle East, Isaksen, Devi and Hochschild (2008: 73) argue that women may choose to migrate and use remittances to better their families, but a more powerful process of attenuation of social solidarities or the 'for itself-ness of families and communities' is simultaneously at work. "Indeed, as whole villages in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Kerala, Latvia, and the Ukraine, are emptied of mothers, aunts, grandmothers and daughters, it and may not be too much to speak of a desertification of Third World care-givers and the emotional commons they would have sustained had they been able to stay" (Ibid). Such contentions mystify social frameworks in the global south and reify social solidarities as benign, when in actual practice, they are constituted and fractured by hierarchies of caste, class, race, age and patriarchy. Also as England (2006) had pointed out Hochschild provides no evidence that the children whose mothers migrate are worse off than they would be if their mothers had stayed, in other words, that the trade-off between losing their mother's time and gaining the money their mothers' earned was not worth it. However, the gains from women's migration are reduced by the costs attendant upon it on account of disruption of patriarchal relations at home and misappropriation of their savings. Some observations of these costs of migration are in order.

Patriarchy expressed through marital power relations provides the means for spouses of migrant women to extract women's labour and misappropriate the women's remittances in the source regions of South India. The position of the primary caregiver to children of migrant women is usually taken by another woman (in addition to her normal workload) from the kin network, frequently the mother or sister of the migrant woman or a female

relative from her husband's family. In some families, where the migrant's spouse had assumed responsibility for housework and childcare, daughters were pressed into service in ways that affected their time for school work and play. In other instances, spouses of migrant women became involved in other intimate relationships and neglected their household responsibilities. More frequently, however, spouses diverted a part of remittances for their own personal leisure.

Whereas men's extra-marital relationships caused little social tension, norms of caste and patriarchy intersect to subject MDWs to stigma on account of suspicion that they breach gender and sexual norms. In the context of the migration of nurses from Kerala, Walton Roberts (2012) has underlined the need to take note of stigma in any attempt to assess nurses migration within the GCC framework. Overseas mobility removes women from the everyday regulatory scope of local patriarchies which along with the nature of their work in the homes of employers renders migration of women fraught with sexual meanings. Migrant domestic work is conflated with sex work and migrant women are collectively subject to the stigma of a blemished identity.

Migrant domestic workers are drawn overwhelmingly from the historically oppressed communities and from families under economic stress. But the nature of marginality of MDWs in the source regions (in two different parts of India) corresponded to the scales at which stigma operated. In Kerala, there is a disproportionate presence of women outside marital protection – divorced, separated or widowed – among MDWs and the stigma attached to them permeates sending families and communities in the source contexts (which were castes/communities categorised as Other Backward Classes). Given the general currency of the male breadwinner norm in Kerala, the marital status profile of MDWs reflects a distinct form of social disadvantage. In AP, by contrast, MDWs were predominantly currently married and women's migration was more acceptable to their spouses and other family members than in Kerala. Stigma operated more outside the main sending communities, (which were the Scheduled Castes and OBCs) and was sharply prevalent among the privileged castes and in public opinion. Another factor that indicated the greater marginality of MDWs

from Kerala is that though they had higher literacy and age at marriage than their counterparts from AP, the gap between them and all women in the state was greater in Kerala than in AP.

Thus, in distinct ways in the two source regions (Kerala and Andhra Pradesh), the social position of MDWs constrained their ability to leverage the financial gains of overseas employment into dignity and self respect. The migration regime in India and the social frameworks in the source regions imposed distinct costs on women whether it was to gain access to overseas employment, the incentive structure to invest in skills or the responsibility to protect themselves. These included payoffs to informal networks and salaries that were not commensurate to their workload. The structural and institutional conditions of migration, therefore, imposed severe limits on the ability of Indian MDWs to realise the true value of their labour.

It is apparent, therefore, that the benefits of overseas employment of Indian MDWs are undercut by patriarchal forces that operate in tandem at the macro level through state policy and at the micro level through social frameworks that stigmatise women migrants and lead to social disruption. With their rights to mobility compromised by state policy and with the refusal of the Indian state to protect their rights against exploitation in overseas employment, women are forced to navigate a difficult course and unable to realise the true value of their labour.

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