



Indian Women as Nurses and Domestic Workers in the Middle East: A Feminist Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is a gendered process. Who goes, why, and where, the experience in the destination country, and impact on family relations are all embedded in social norms and gender relations. Economic theories of migration pointing to structuralist forces have identified wage differentials across geographic regions, core and periphery relationship of former colonizers with their former colonies and the dual nature of valued and devalued work of the receiving economy as the causes of population mobility across borders (Harris and Todaro 1970; Wallerstein 1974; Piore 1979). Another group of functionalist theories believe that micro processes interacting with the individual, the family and the community are initiators of migration. They believe that migration is a rational choice made by an individual to maximize profits or gains (Todaro 1969). Some shift the focus from individual agency to family interdependence and term migration as a family risk-diversion strategy (Stark 1991). Other theorists postulate that migration occurs out of a

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community following the networks created by the diaspora (Massey 1990). All these theories are gender neutral. They assume that the same forces propel men and women and shape their experiences in a similar manner.

This assumption is challenged by feminist migration research that postulates that gender is a system of power relations that permeates all social and economic institutions. Therefore, men and women move under different compulsions, in the context of differential opportunities and experience dissimilar constraints upon their agency. Here, I present the feminist lens of migration research by applying it to two streams of women's migration from the state of Kerala to the Gulf region, namely the mobility of nurses and domestic workers.

The next section describes the essence of the feminist lens and the aspects of women's migration that have been explored. The subsequent section deconstructs the narratives of Indian nurse migration that is extant in the literature. Similarly, the section thereafter deconstructs the narratives of domestic worker migration from extant literature. It is followed by a comparison of the two narratives, and finally are suggested potential areas for future research.

THE FEMINIST LENS OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

Gender analysis of migration focuses on gendered systems of inequality in households, labour markets and cultures that influence women's migration (Morokvasic 1984) and presents how gender relations impact as well as are impacted by migration. Firstly, feminist theorizing explains why some women migrate while others do not by connecting normative gender expectations to macro structural forces and individual agency. At the very outset, opportunities and constraints for men and women in their home country are gendered and dissimilar. Girls' education is given low priority when scarce resources have to be allocated among children, making women educationally disadvantaged than men when entering the labour force. Commensurate with the differential qualifications, women are segregated at the lower end of the informal economy. Limited employment opportunities and meagre salaries work as powerful push factors for women to migrate (Gamburd 2008; Afsar 2011).

Structural elements such as state policies and labour market preferences combine with cultural norms to shape women's migration (Oishi 2005). Domestic service and care work are the two sectors where employer preference demands female migrant workers as "natural caregivers". This gendered

demand matches the social norms about women's nurturing role and, hence, lowers the barriers for their migration. At the same time the construction of reproductive labour as "women's work" leads to its devaluation (Silvey 2004). Studies have also shown how state-employer cooperation increases the magnitude of certain labour flows. Feminist scholars are of the opinion that it is the employer preference and the institutional support provided by both sending and receiving countries that determines the prevalence of migrant women in particular occupations and destinations (George 2005).

Gender norms determine the kinds of social networks that women can access. In societies where women are under patriarchal surveillance, they have access to only female networks and mostly kin networks (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Curran et al. 2005).

The feminist lens is also directed towards the period after migration, examining the gendered process of integration and adaptation into host society, the transformation of gender relations within the family, the meaning and form of transnational motherhood, and social mobility in the community of origin. Host states often impose control over low-skilled migrant workers, who are denied rights, citizenship and opportunities for long-term settlement, especially targeting women joining the most devalued sectors of work (Truong and Gasper 2008).

A very significant contribution that the feminist migration scholars have made is in the study of gender relations within migrant households. Transformation in gender relations could be in the form of reversal of breadwinner and caregiver roles of men and women, more egalitarian division of household work and parenting, or voice for women in decision making in family and financial matters (Grzywacz et al. 2009). However, role reversal can be bitterly resisted by partners of migrant women as the notion of masculinity is linked to the breadwinner role. Challenged in their status of the provider and head of the household, men have been known to resort to hyper masculinity in the form of violence or alcoholism (Grzywacz et al. 2009; Gamburd 2000). However, there are also studies of changing definitions of masculinity to encompass co-breadwinner and co-nurturer roles (Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

Some emigrant women need to leave children behind in their home countries. A transnational motherhood puts strain on mothers' relationships with children as well induces feelings of guilt (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avilla 1997; Parrenas 2005; Rajan 2013). The state and media often castigate migrant mothers for abandoning their nurturing role in favour

of earning money. However, the women and their families redefine motherhood as the ability to provide food, shelter and education rather than being physically present (Gamburd 2008).

Economists have often berated female migrants for spending their remittance on daily consumption and conspicuous consumption instead of investing them in productive assets. Feminist migration scholars, however, defend the women by arguing that since women migrants often come from a lower socioeconomic scale than men, it makes logical sense to them to spend on daily consumption needs, which would not be met otherwise. Conspicuous consumption, helping extended kin and neighbours and spending on community projects build valuable social ties that can be a support for the family left behind by ensuring attention and care by community members (Suksomboon 2008).

Thus, the feminist lens of viewing women's migration offers a very holistic perspective of the lived experience of being a migrant.

DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT NURSES

The narratives of nurse migration fit neatly into the feminist theoretical framework. The structural factors that create the context of migration are very clear. To begin with is the structural discrimination against the profession in India. The intersection of neglectful state policies and lack of regulation of the booming private healthcare industry has pushed these low-paid, low-status professionals against the wall. The quality of their training is brought into question by the management of private hospitals to justify low salaries. Appointments and dismissals are unregulated by the state (Nair et al. 2016; Walton-Roberts et al. 2017; Nair and Rajan 2017). The result is that although nursing training can cost a student one to five lakh rupees, their salaries in India are merely Rs 7500 per month for degree holders and Rs 6500 per month for diploma holders (Walton-Roberts and Rajan 2013). The very same nurses can get up to Rs 40,000 per month upon migration to the Gulf countries (Gill 2011). Therefore, the structural discrimination in the home country literally pushes out nurses into the route of migration to be able to repay the debt incurred for their education.

In contrast to the bleak domestic scenario, the demand in the Gulf countries created a channel of mobility. The petrol boom in the 1970s led to the development of the healthcare infrastructure. Here was created an ideal alternative—the recruitment process was simple and the expenditure

on travel documents and tickets, too, were within payable limits (Gill 2011). Gender preference of the Gulf employers followed the global cultural preference of women for care work (Percot 2006a; Rajan and Percot 2011). The result was that a specifically feminized flow of migration directed towards the Gulf countries was created. It was the complementarity of state discrimination at home and a gendered demand in a specific regional labour market that crafted this migratory route.

As remittances flowed in, the Government of India viewed this as a positive opportunity in the career of Indian nurses. The National Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (2005) noted that it would be advantageous for India to increase the number of nursing schools and colleges, and to ensure that the curriculum and training attains international standards (Gill 2011). The Indian government pursued the policy of upgrading nursing schools to nursing colleges and the nurse training sector was opened to both private and foreign investment. The result is a proliferation of private colleges able to train a larger number of nurses with migration aspirations. Thus, the state, in collaboration with the private sector, facilitated greater flow into this migratory route.

Once this conducive environment was created, let us understand who moved. Ninety per cent of the nurses working in the Gulf countries are Christian women from Kerala (Percot 2006a). The predominance of Christian women in the nursing profession has been shaped by cultural norms. The notion of the “Good Samaritan” in Christianity makes nursing a noble profession. Moreover, as missionaries were the introducers of modern medicine in India, they made the profession acceptable to the community. They certainly gave preference to recruiting women of their own faith (Nair and Percot 2007). While these cultural factors attracted Christian women, the cultural concepts of “purity and pollution” among high-caste Hindus excluded them. Handling polluting bodily fluids and taking care of non-kin males was rejected by the Hindu community. Among the Muslim community, the very notion of women working among non-kin males was anathema. Therefore, Christian women were overrepresented in this profession (Abraham 2004). Hence, we witness the interaction of macro structural forces with cultural norms to create inclusionary and exclusionary criteria at the community level.

Within the culturally shortlisted community, strategy of the families and agency of the young women come into play. Nurses working in Gulf from Kerala hail from rural, lower middle-class families owning less than five acres of agricultural land. Fathers may supplement this income with

small businesses or petty jobs while mothers are mostly housewives (Nair and Percot 2007). In the 1970s, when the Gulf countries first began recruiting Indian nurses, migration seemed to be a “good opportunity” that unexpectedly came in the way for the existing cadre of nurses. However, a new generation of migrants in the last ten years has consciously chosen this profession for its opportunities for migration and builds an elaborate livelihood strategy with their families around mobility (Percot 2006a). Witnessing the high returns to migration, training a daughter to become a nurse has become a family strategy. The family’s expectation is that the remittance by the daughter would bring about an improved standard of living as well as help attain the dream of climbing the social ladder. The possibility of negotiating a reduced amount of dowry or attract a higher-class groom (who is looking for a facilitated migration) makes it a family project.

The agency of the individual herself is more evident among the younger generation of nurses who articulate non-economic reasons. One reason that these women cite is to escape patriarchal surveillance by family, kin and neighbours. Nursing is the only profession that guarantees migration and, hence, its attraction for these young women. The second reason is the desire to see the world and experience new cultures. Visas are expensive and difficult to get. These barriers do not hinder nurse mobility (Percot 2006a; Percot and Rajan 2007). Thus, as postulated by feminist scholars, the interaction between macro structural forces that constrain or provide opportunities in the home country, labour market preferences, family livelihood strategies and individual desires finally determine who moves.

Social networks are the conduit for information. The nursing diaspora sends back information on salaries, conditions of life and so on so that the new migrants are well aware of what to expect (Percot 2006b). This is a very close-knit all-female social network of aunts, cousins and their friends. The nurse aspirants from other communities feel that these networks exclude them and give an unfair advantage to Christian women (Walton-Roberts 2010).

Moving on to what happens after migration, the Gulf countries offer no channels for “settlement”. The contracts are of one- or two-years’ duration. A nurse might work there for decades, but always on a short-term contract that keeps her status “precarious” in the host country. There is no question of gaining citizenship, she is not allowed to own a house and is unable to procure visas for adult children (Nair and Percot 2007). They

never feel “at home” despite living there for decades (Percot 2006a). As feminist scholars have said, the host country, through its immigration laws, prefers to create a floating labour force with no rights.

Opportunity or strategy, the nurses feel liberated by the migration experience. They are not under social pressure to do things they do not want to do, can spend time with their husbands, can dress in a modern way, can have a social life beyond relatives, and enjoy living in a cosmopolitan city (Nair and Percot 2007).

Remittance and gift giving are directed towards the families. While unmarried women remit to their parents in preparation for dowry, the married women have to maintain the ties through remittances and gift giving to ensure care for their left-behind children by the family or for care of the elderly by extended kin (Percot 2006a).

Transnational motherhood is forced upon some and is a choice made by others. Married nurses who stay alone cannot possibly keep their children with them. Their heart breaks when they leave behind newborns or when they see that their children are more attached to the actual caregiver than to them (Percot 2006a). Even if the nurses and their spouses are living in the Gulf, the practical difficulties such as lack of day care facilities, high rents of private apartments and high cost of education make transnational motherhood the only viable option. Indian nurses, too, have changed the definition of motherhood from physical caregiving to being a provider. Being “part time” mothers is considered to be preferable to not harbouring any ambitions for the future of children.

Finally, what is the impact of nurse migration on gender relations? The migrant nurses, do indeed, feel empowered while living abroad. They mention having access to bank accounts with their spouses and a voice in money management (Percot 2006). Moreover, most women remitted money to their parents as well, a break with tradition that implies more power for the women within their households (Percot and Rajan 2007). They are quite conscious of the significance of their economic contribution to the family and that they had opened the migratory route for their spouses (Percot 2006a). However, the impact on gender relations in the home community is not apparent. Firstly, their migration perpetuates rather than challenges the patriarchal norm of dowry. Instead of getting dowry discount, they were expected to pay more due to their better financial position (Walton-Roberts and Rajan 2013). Secondly, the husbands appeared to be “touchy” about the spouses earning more. This sensitivity was reflected in the fact that many of them referred to their wives’ salaries

as “savings” and their own as the means of supporting the family (Nair and Percot 2007). Thirdly, researchers have not come across any husband taking care of the children on his own, as left-behind wives tend to do. It was always the responsibility of female kin (Percot 2006a). Finally, even though they listened to their wives’ opinions while living abroad, the investments back home were made by the men (Percot 2006a). Thus, as feminist scholars would say, greater empowerment within the couple relationship might not translate into change in gender relations when under the surveillance of the community.

DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

The domestic workers who go to the Gulf weigh their options against the wages available to them in India that range between Rs 100 and Rs 200 per day, a monthly salary of maximum Rs 6000 per month. In contrast, 50 per cent of the housemaids in the Gulf earn Rs 12,000 to Rs 15,000 per month. The highest salary is around Rs 20,000 (Rajan et al. 2015). Trapped at the bottom of the economy at home and being unable to earn a liveable wage, migration is adopted as a way to ensure survival. Therefore, the migration of domestic workers is more akin to distress migration. Here again, the state’s neglect in protecting this marginalized section is the structural push for mobility.

The demand for domestic workers in the Gulf, too, can be traced to the oil boom of the 1970s. The wave of migration was in response to the demand from the new middle class that was employing workers as a symbol of social status (Kodoth 2015a, b). Local domestic workers demand higher salaries and, hence, the ever-increasing demand for Indian women. Thus, the employer preference for low-waged maids, supported by the labour import policy has again created a new profession-specific migratory route to a particular region.

Negotiating this structural context of distress and opportunity, this feminized migratory route is traversed by the most marginalized in Kerala’s society—women from the coastal fishing communities, urban slums, high-land villages and even the remote tribal areas. The majority of the migrants are those who have displayed individual agency to move out of a destitute situation. They have selected the option of mobility after the complete breakdown of marital provisioning (Kodoth 2015a, b). This situation hap-

pens when the husband dies, abandons his wife, fritters away his income in alcohol, is old or an invalid and so on, resulting in being an incompetent provider. Many a time, if the wife wishes to work locally, the husband is suspicious of her fidelity and makes it difficult for her to sustain a job. Therefore, going away out of the sphere of his influence is the only way to earn and put food on the table.

Agency to move by unmarried women is rarer and much more difficult. Although the helplessness of their life stories evokes sympathy in the community, taking this step is the informed decision that they would pay the cost of having to forego a conventional marriage. However, in the absence of a mother in the family who could have been the mover, the elder daughter takes on this responsibility again in the context of absence of a male provider (Kodoth 2015a, b). Both these groups of women display desperate agency within highly constrained contexts.

The middle ground is trod cautiously by some women who earn to supplement the inadequate income of their spouses. This strategy has been termed as “deferred provisioning” (Kodoth 2015a, b) as currently the women earn more but after certain financial goals are reached, the husband is expected to return to the role of the primary provider. The narratives of this group follow the family strategy route—specific needs that cannot be met with local income make the family plan a temporary migration. Other circumstances such as the husband’s inability to get a visa or the prohibitive cost of visas for male workers makes the migration of the wife the rational choice exercised by the family.

However, unlike the policy indulgence towards nurse migration, the domestic workers have to navigate a very prejudiced set of policy barriers and demeaning working conditions that heighten their vulnerability. The Government of India’s protective policy for migrant domestic workers (MDWs) is framed within a gendered and class-based nationalism that considers the migration of Indian women as domestic workers as degrading (Kodoth 2015a, b). The moral outrage over the stories of exploitation and abuse forms the justification for the restrictive procedures. These women mostly fall within the category of Emigration Check Required (ECR) “less-skilled” workers, whose education level is less than matriculation. They have to gain clearance from the office of Protector of Emigrants by presenting a direct contract with the employer attested by the Indian embassy at the destination, payment of a substantial security deposit by the prospective employer and specifying a minimum wage. In view of the fact that the employer preference is for low-wage workers, very few would supply this

deposit or guarantee minimum wage. Obviously, these procedures are a way to discourage migration. Moreover, young women below the age of 30 are not to be allowed to migrate to “protect them from abuse”. The class-based prejudice is reflected in the attitude that these mostly non-literate women lack awareness because of which the state has to step in to prevent their mobility. Curtailing women’s mobility merely channels them into undocumented flows that render them vulnerable to trafficking (Varghese and Rajan 2011; Rajan and Joseph 2013, 2015). Thus, the valuation of the work determines the level of policy support. As Silvey (2004) has said, devalued work is denied both state as well as “public” support.

Social networks become critical for these women to find a route to the Gulf. Relatives and acquaintances working there encourage the women to migrate and help in bringing down the resistance of the families by allaying fears of abuse (Kodoth 2015a, b). They might even be intermediaries for procuring a visa. The fishing communities of the coastal regions, who were the first senders of migrant women, have now developed a self-perpetuating chain migration, with almost every household sending a migrant through contacts with kin (Kodoth and Varghese 2012).

Host nations have a harsh control regime for unskilled workers. Domestic workers are employed under the *Kafala* system, whereby the worker is tied to a particular employer. She can stay legally in the host country as long as she is working for that employer only. Becoming a runaway renders her illegal (Kodoth and Varghese 2012). The destination countries, therefore, forge legal frameworks to track the migrant workers at every step. The virtual captivity of the MDW gives the employer the opportunity to impose slavery like work condition and even perpetuate physical and sexual abuse, secure in the knowledge that she cannot change jobs. Culpable employers are rarely punished and they, in retaliation, slap charges of theft on the runaway women. Instead of redressal from abuse, the laws declare her an absconder, liable for imprisonment (Kanchana and Rajan 2014). Thus, we see the operation of the unequal treatment of skilled and unskilled workers in the immigration and labour regimes in the destination countries (Truong and Gasper 2008).

These women are also trapped in a strong culture of masculinity that demands subservience to conjugal authority. If a provisioning male is present, then a woman’s migration is not tolerated. She has to demonstrate to the community her helplessness and destitution caused by the complete breakdown of marital provisioning to gain approval for mobility. If she needs to supplement the income of her husband due to specific needs, she

has to frame the justification for migration as a decision taken by him and needs to emphasize the short duration of the move. The MDWs are careful to demonstrate their adherence to patriarchy by providing dowry for their daughters and remaining in abusive marriages (Kodoth 2015a, b). Thus, migration might not bring about any change in gender relations despite mobility and economic independence.

COMPARING THE TWO MIGRATION STREAMS

The nurse migration flow is now on an upward trajectory of valuation. Earlier, the migratory route met a dead end in the Gulf region. Now the Gulf is just a transitory phase to reach the USA, Europe, Canada and Australia. The migration trajectory has been directed to a more valued destination and, therefore, this profession has gained value as well. In contrast, the domestic workers are an unskilled group whose lack of skills stigmatizes them. Moreover, they move into a job that is considered menial in both sending and receiving societies. This migration route is known to be an exploitative one, including sexual exploitation, and, hence, those women who choose this form of migration are considered desperate and not skilled. Further, this profession is at a dead end in the Gulf country and there is no extension of the route to the West. Therefore, the valuation of this migration stagnates at the bottom rung of the ladder.

Although the demand for both nurses and domestic workers is high in the Gulf countries, the private sector in India sees only the former as worth investing in. The value addition in training is reflected in higher chances of moving to the West. Hence, private colleges have proliferated and are in high demand despite their high fees. On the other hand, domestic workers do not have any kind of institutional support for value addition. They are hired for their exploitability and not skill set.

The government, too, is operating under the paradigm of “pride” and “shame”. It is considered a matter of pride that nursing training in India is on par with international standards. Therefore, the government encourages the export of this kind of labour flow with pride. On the other hand, the movement of women to work as domestic workers in other countries is considered to hurt the national pride. Therefore, policies try to discourage this migration to the extent possible.

Migration is a high-risk venture for the domestic workers who, without qualifications and state support, are at the mercy of fraudulent practices by exploitative agents. On the other hand, migration is an ordinary career

path for the more privileged nurses. Nurses are not cheated often—there are only a few cases of not getting the salary promised due to the deduction of commission by middlemen. They do not have to face situations of false visas, false contracts, denial of payment for months, being placed in jobs or locations other than the ones being promised—contexts that are quite common in the experiences of domestic workers. Therefore, nurse migration is much more secure than domestic worker migration.

Finally, there seems to be a vast difference in the financial returns accruing from the two migratory routes. Nurses accumulate lifelong savings, send children for expensive professional education, build assets back home, invest capital in businesses, and live a middle-class diasporic life. These imply a high level of financial gain. On the other hand, the remittances of domestic workers go into daily consumption needs, marriage expenses and perhaps building a house. A single daughter's marriage is said to wipe away several years of savings. A woman may have been a migrant for several years and yet be unable to build a house. Return migrants have been known to try to sell their house due to shortfall of savings (Kodoth and Varghese 2012). Thus, their earnings appear to be able to tide over specific needs, but a lifelong asset base seems unattainable.

FURTHER RESEARCH

An underexplored domain of research is the gender relations among couples who live together in the Gulf. Although the man has to be an independent migrant for this living arrangement to come about, yet the woman was the first migrant and, in many cases, it is her employer who provided the loan for the husband to set up a business in the Gulf country. Given this reversal of power dynamics, is there any change in gender relations? Moreover, if the wife is working in a very demanding profession, is there a shift towards a more egalitarian sharing of domestic chores and parenting?

Transnational motherhood has not been explored either among the Gulf migration stream women. Many nurses and all domestic workers leave behind children. What is their relationship with their children? How do they interpret being a good mother? Who are the primary caregivers back home? What is the role of the father in parenting?

Nurse migration to the Gulf has become a “Culture of Migration” among women of the Christian community in Kerala. The stock of community knowledge is transmitted through social networks. It would be interesting to explore how the recent nurse migrants from other communities

gain information and access to this migration stream. In view of the close-knit nature of social networks, can the community outsiders gain from this repository of knowledge or do they have to begin their journey as pioneers? The lived experience of migrants from new source communities could be another area of research.

The vulnerability of domestic workers and the need for policy protection forms the bulk of the literature on women in this migration stream. While some research has been done on agency before leaving, there is no in-depth study of the lived experience of both live-in as well as runaway domestics. The live-in's daily negotiations for a tolerable working condition as well as to enhance her value in the view of the employer and the runaway's strategies to operate in the illegal domain without institutional support would add depth to the knowledge about these women.

CONCLUSION

The migration of Indian women to the Gulf has been well explored in the past two decades. However, this extensive literature, except in a few cases, gives an objective overview and not a subjective understanding of individual lives and choices. Moreover, the focus has been mostly on the trajectory of mobility as successful or unsuccessful migrants. The consequences of the mobility on persons linked to the migrants and social institutions and norms are underexplored. This stream of research is now mature enough to move beyond the question of "What happened?" to "Then what happened?"

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