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Failures of Marital Provisioning and the Framing of Agency by Migrant Domestic Workers from Kerala

Praveena Kodoth*

Abstract— **The major structuring contexts of cross border labour migration from India do not enable the mobility of women, yet women from Kerala are a visible presence in jobs such as domestic work in the Middle East. Overseas mobility removes women from the everyday regulatory scope of local / family patriarchy. Cultural norms that restrict women's autonomous mobility, independent of their families, and mandate marital control over their sexuality informs legal restrictions on women's migration. Emigration policy restrictions on women are justified by policymakers as necessary to protect women at the lowest end of the job hierarchy, but end up fostering irregular migration at greater risk to migrant women. These contextual and empirical factors render the agency of emigrant women workers oppositional and subject migrant women to stigma. Yet, women from Kerala have been migrating as domestic workers for more than half a century. Thus, I ask how do aspiring women overcome cultural barriers at home and obtain access to mobility or in other words, what negotiations underpin women's movement? The women whose narratives I analyse here turned to overseas jobs to improve their lives; but they emphasize the failures of normative marital provisioning as the impetus for migration, directing attention to the compulsion to earn for their and their families' survival. By highlighting the lack of choice, I argue that migrant women refuse to own their agency in an effort to ground their migration on socially acceptable terms and thereby to garner licit space for migration. The paper draws upon a survey and semi structured interviews with 150 emigrant and returnee women from Trivandrum district, Kerala.**

Keywords- **Women's labour migration, migrant domestic workers, Kerala, Middle East, Women's agency, Paternalist emigration policy.**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Contrary narratives circulate about women workers who migrate from Kerala to take up

jobs as domestic workers, ayahs, cleaners, cooks and assistants in commercial establishments to the Middle East. The popular Malayalam film, Gaddama (2011), captured a dominant narrative showing the protagonist, a migrant domestic worker (MDW), as compelled to take up an overseas job in penury after the loss of her husband. The film catapulted MDWs into the sub national consciousness but depicted the protagonist as abused, helpless and waiting to be 'rescued', divesting her of agency even before her journey began. A second narrative, by contrast, endows migrant women with significant agency albeit of an illicit form, suggesting that they make money through sex work. In contrast to the dominant narrative, this one circulates in subterranean ways, in the form of innuendos and whispers, thus lacking public visibility though by no means lacking public impact. Together, they resonate on the fashioning of a paternalist emigration policy that sees women's labour migration as undesirable. State policy is of tangential interest in this paper, the more important concern being with migrant women's agency. Agency has been defined as the ability of a person to manipulate her personal environment, i.e., to mobilise information and other resources and to use these as the basis of decision making and action (Dyson and Moore, 1983). While migrant women exercise agency, in this sense, in making decisions regarding migration and acting on them, in the paper, I wish to draw attention to how women frame their own agency in a social context where 'owning' it risks attracting the pejorative meanings associated with women's mobility and sexual freedoms.

Kerala is a pioneer among Indian states in being responsive to the concerns of migrant workers and setting up an institutional framework to support them.[1] However, women labour migrants have remained invisible in the state. A series of survey-based studies on migration from Kerala normalizes this invisibility and has limited the questions they ask about gender to issues arising from male-dominated migration. [2] Women's cross border labour migration from Kerala has been structured by three contexts - the cultural milieu and economic contexts in Kerala, the legal context in India (which together determine the supply of workers) and the economic and legal context in the Middle East (which determines demand). The cultural and legal contexts in India / Kerala are interlinked as a paternalist policy is informed by and reinforces restrictive gender and sexual norms, making it all the more difficult for women to question dominant power relations and obtain legitimate space for migration.

The male breadwinner norm entrenched in Kerala's cultural milieu produces migrant women's agency as oppositional. The norm of marital provisioning or the

husband/father as the provider of families was ushered into the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala through colonial intervention and the modernizing reforms that came in its wake. It was among the norms that cut the ground for a new form of patriarchy which institutionalized the need for marital protection of women within a monogamous framework. Modernizing reforms in the early-mid twentieth century affected a shift and a dispersal of patriarchal authority from propertied men and women at the apex of the agrarian and jati hierarchies, to individual husbands within modern conjugal families (Kodoth 2008). Reforms centered marriage as the core of family, where previously matrilineal social institutions did not, and constructed women's access to employment or other forms of direct access to incomes as secondary to conjugal domesticity. [3] Women's autonomous mobility, independent of their families, and the nature of their overseas employment – care work in the intimate domains of the homes of strangers – brought women under suspicion of breaching gender and sexual norms and subjected them to stigma.

The legal context in India is framed by the Emigration Act, 1983, which mandates emigration clearance for all migrants. Citizens with less than 10 years of education and some specially designated occupational groups such as nurses are considered to warrant additional protection from the state and therefore need to undergo a special procedure to obtain emigration clearance unlike citizens with more education, categorised as Emigration Check not required (ECNR). The ECR category applies only to designated countries assessed to have poor working conditions, that include those in the Middle East. The procedure for emigration clearance involves verification of prescribed documents by the office of the Protector of Emigrant, that acts as a border check point. The ECR mechanism has been used to impose additional restrictions on women that has narrowed the categories of women eligible for migration and the regular pathway of migration available to them. Conditions include a minimum age of 30 years since the 1990s and in August 2016, the government stipulated that ECR category women may be recruited by only stipulated public sector recruitment agencies, i.e., they are not permitted to obtain employment and work visas through private sources including their own family members and friends. Though sponsors may recruit directly through the eMigrate portal; to do so they must make a security deposit of $2500, which makes the cost of recruitment prohibitive. [4] Justifying paternalism, policy has, over more than half a century, represented women migrants as lured by the 'lucrative' promises of 'unscrupulous agents' (see for instance, GOI, 1973, 2018) implying that they are incapable

of making careful and judicious decisions. A restrictive policy has diverted women to the use of irregular migration at greater risk to themselves.

The legal context in the Middle East is defined by the Kafala system of sponsorship and recruitment, which require migrant workers to be sponsored and to work only for their sponsor. Thus, workers' residence permits are tied to their sponsor-employers and the sponsor wields heightened powers over workers including to fire and deport them or to prevent the worker from leaving by denying her an exit permit. MDWs are excluded from the general labour laws as they are considered household workers though recently some of the Middle Eastern countries have enacted separate laws for them. In practice, however, the continuation of the Kafala system makes it difficult for foreign workers to claim rights and could prompt them tolerate violations of their rights for fear of losing their employment status that country. While the system makes it difficult for source countries to intervene on behalf of their workers, source countries have adopted different approaches. Countries that adopt a liberal, open border policy – most prominently the Philippines – have been more proactive in building infrastructure to train workers and to extend protection to them at the destination.

Demand for MDWs in the Middle East has remained steady in the face of economic downturns, nationalisation policies and even the recent pandemic. A steady increase in women's work participation rates among nationals, a high proportion of children under 14 years, demographic aging and inadequate care facilities have all contributed to demand (Tayah and Assaf, 2018, ILO, 2021). The employment of domestic workers also has 'status' value for people of the region (ILO, 2013: 32, al Najjar, 2002, Sabban, 2002: 89). Additionally, a large expatriate population that includes professionally employed women with young children also employ migrant domestic workers. Despite the risks arising from the power asymmetry engendered by the Kafala rules which has led to instances of severe abuse, there has been large scale migration of domestic workers from Asia and Africa in the hope of earning higher incomes.

Indian women were among the first foreigners from outside the Arab region to take up employment as domestic workers in the countries of the Persian Gulf (Kodoth, 2016). Kerala has been an important source of migrant labour in the Middle East since the mid twentieth century (Kodoth, 2017, 2020). An early source of demand for domestic workers came from white collar workers from Kerala but migration grew with the increased demand from nationals since the

1970s. Migrants have relied heavily on private networks and connections, including recruitment agencies, to obtain overseas employment and passage. They have continued to do so, despite increased risk, even after private recruitment was banned in 2016 (Kodoth, 2020).

The women whose narratives I analyse here turned to overseas work to improve their lives; but their mobility removed them from the everyday regulatory scope of the local community and brought them under suspicion. Overseas employment also positions women visibly as breadwinners of their families in a social context characterized by marital provisioning by husbands. However, women may be compelled to don the role of breadwinner by the breakdown of marriage. Thus, I argue that migrant women resort to a subversive framing of their agency that grounds their migration on socially acceptable terms in order to salvage some legitimacy for their decisions. Women seek to suppress the element of individual choice as a response to the socio-cultural context that renders their exercise of agency as oppositional, at once defiant and compromised, and to a paternalist state policy that reinforces the patriarchal power of families and communities to control women.

The paper draws on material generated through field work in 2013 in Trivandrum district of Kerala, which comprised a survey of 150 women migrants and those who had returned in 2008 or later, that is in the five years prior to the survey along with longer semi structured interviews with these women. The survey captured social and demographic characteristics of the women as well as summed up aspects like decision making. The interlinked cultural and legal contexts have not changed substantially. One, despite the ban on private recruitment, many aspirants depend on widely available personal or commercial networks (see Kodoth, 2020). However, state paternalism has altered the quality of networks as the more credible private recruiters prefer not to recruit women, leaving the field open for the unscrupulous actors. Two, the change in regulation in 2016 has not led an increase in migration from Kerala, which remains at relatively low levels at least partially because of irregular migration. Three, norms change slowly and there is no evidence to show that gender norms have changed substantially during the intervening period especially with respect to poorly educated women's autonomous mobility for work. The choice of Trivandrum for the fieldwork is important because of the temporal depth of migration, cultural diversity of migrants (see table 3) and their distribution across the coastal region, highland villages and urban slums.

II. SITUATING WOMEN'S LABOUR MIGRATION FROM INDIA

There are over 2 million women domestic workers in the Middle East and almost all of them are migrants (ILO, 2021: 2, 5). Before the oil boom in the early 1970s, the employment of domestic workers which was restricted largely to the wealthy families but since it also became a symbol of social status. The bulk of the workers are sourced from Asia.

Table 1 Emigration of women as domestic workers

Country	Year	Number
The Philippines	2010	173,883
	2019	260,993
	2020	40,203
	2021	NA
	2022	NA
Sri Lanka	2010	229,142
	2019	61,489
	2020	15,322
	2021	29,266
	2022	74,007
Bangladesh*	2010	27,706
	2019	104,786
	2020	21,934
	2021	80,143
	2022	105,466
Indonesia	2010	267,231
	2019	85,715
	2020	57,630**
	2021	—
	2022	—
India***	2010	10,718
	2019	1,731
	2020	513
	2021	608
	2022	5,895

*Figures are for women migrants. An estimated 80 % of women migrants have been domestic workers (Siddiqui et al., 2019);

** Computed assuming 50% of women migrants are MDWs, as in 2019;

***Figures are for women with less than 10 years of education.

Source: Computed from Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, Bangladesh (https://old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/logout), Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment, Philippines Overseas Employment Administration, e-Migrate, India

India is a smaller source of MDWs in the Middle East, overall, when compared to the other major source countries in Table 1. However, ECR category women migrants are poorly documented because restrictions divert them to use irregular channels. The Philippines has pursued a liberal open border policy since the 1970s and has invested heavily in migration infrastructure and in equipping migrant women with skills and education. Bangladesh switched to a liberal policy around 2010 and has seen an exponential growth in migration since then. Indonesia saw a decline in migration with the imposition of bans to specific countries on account of complaints of abuse. However, there may be an increase in deployment after the pandemic. [5] Sri Lanka closely followed the Philippines approach from the 1980s until 2013, when it adopted the Family Background Report that discourages mothers of young children from migrating. Weeraratne, (2016: 16) has observed that a decline in departures of women from the country has been accompanied by evidence of irregular migration.

There was a sharp dip in emigration clearances to women post 2016, as the state-run agencies took time to begin recruitment (Kodoth, 2021). Prior to 2016 also there was sizeable irregular migration on account of the minimum age and to avoid the $2500 security deposit (a condition that was imposed in 2011).

Table 2 Number of Registered Indian Women Workers in Kuwait and Oman, 2018

Women workers	Kuwait	Oman
In the private sector (mostly nurses)	24,232	
MDWs (for 2013)	69,858	26,507*
Government sector (Finance and administration)	16,192	
Total women workers		45,402

Source: Standing Committee on Labour (2018), *Begum (2014)

Nonetheless, India is a leading source of women MDWs in Kuwait and Oman. Indian MDWs have had a long history of migration to the UAE, they have seen a surge recently in Saudi Arabia. The numbers in table 2 refer to the stock of MDWs from India in Kuwait and Oman and are not comparable to the numbers in table 1, which are annual flows. Yet, it is notable that India is among the leading sources of MDWs in these countries and there are more MDWs in these countries than nurses from India, whose migration is recognized and even valorised.

III. MATERIAL CONTEXTS AND MIGRATION RESOURCES

The coastal region of Trivandrum has witnessed migration of women going back to the 1950s and there are villages here that are intensely migrant. Migration from the highland villages and urban slums go back to the early 1980s when private recruiters with networks in Bombay began to play an increased role. Women emigrants are mostly from marginalized social and caste groups. The bulk of the sample of 150 women were from the Other backward classes (OBC), comprising the Latin Catholics (from the coastal fishing communities), Muslims (coastal fishing communities and highland communities), Hindu Ezhavas, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The ST women from the highlands started to migrate overseas only in the 1990s. Less than 10 % of the sample were from the privileged castes.

Table 3 Characteristics of migrant women

Category	**Percentage (%)**
Hindu	31.3
Christian	37.6
Muslim	32.0
Caste	**Percentage (%)**
SC	10.7
ST	2.0
OBC	77.3
Others	8.7
Age	**Percentage (%)**
Below 30	3.3

Category	**Percentage (%)**
30 – 39	20.0
40 – 49	45.3
50 and above	31.3
Marital Status	**Percentage (%)**
Never Married	5.2
Currently Married	58.0
Divorced/Separated	16.0
Widowed	20.7
Education	**Percentage (%)**
Not Literate	11.0
Less than 10 years	81.3
Completed 10 years	5.3
More than 10 years	2.0
Decision Making	**Percentage (%)**
Self	82.0
Jointly with Spouse	11.0
Others	7.0

Source: Author's survey, 2013.

The narrow social and educational profile of women is striking. Most of the women were from relatively older age groups. Women who had started migrating in previous decades continued to migrate in a form of circular transnationalism while fewer younger women entered migrant employment. The small number of young women were from very poor families on the coast; more frequently mothers would migrate to cater to the needs of the family. A disproportionate share of women was either divorced/separated or widowed. According to the Census, 2011, about 73 % of women between 15 and 59 years were currently married while those who are widowed are about 7 % and separated or divorced are 2.2 %. This was indicative of the terms on which women accessed migrant jobs. Though this is a snowballing sample, it covers a large number of villages and wards and there was no particular intention in selecting women of any particular marital status. Thus, this would go some way to indicate that migrant domestic workers are an outlier. While a few older emigrant women were illiterate and a small number of younger women had completed 10 years or more of education, most had a few years of schooling.

Networks have been critical to how women access migrant jobs and overseas passage. Family, extended kin, neighbours, friends, acquaintances and commercial intermediaries motivate women to seek overseas employment and also provide resources ranging from finances, visas and emigration services. Even family members and friends my charge fees for visas and other services thus making it difficult to make sharp distinctions between personal and commercial networks. Women referred to the commercial intermediaries as simply 'travels' because travel agents doubled up as recruiting agents and sourced visas for aspiring workers. Recruiting agents or sub agents are proactive in mobilizing women migrants,

targeting wage labourers and housewives whose financial needs are apparent and persuading them with offers. Once the decision is taken that a particular woman will take up an overseas job, a visa may be obtained in two or three months; sometimes it takes only a couple of weeks because an agent is already in touch with a ready offer. The effects simultaneously of social and commercial networks are evident in the clustering of workers in specific destinations, most prominently Kuwait, and their distribution across the Middle East with the exception of Jordan. A small number of respondents had worked also in Israel, Singapore and Malaysia.

Reports of abuse in overseas employment circulate widely in the source regions. Also, intermediaries referred to generally as agents are notorious for cheating women migrants. The most frequent complaint was that agents deceived women by promising higher salaries than they actually received. However aspiring women migrants are greatly dependent on agents to facilitate their passage to the destination because of the bureaucratic procedures involved. Migration was initiated in interior villages and highland localities by agents, who had gone to homes in search of potential emigrants. In the highland villages, the use of networks produced clusters of extended kin groups, the migration of a woman enabled her siblings, more distant kin and the next generation of relatives to go. Still further in the tribal settlements, agents are a more recent presence.

In the coastal areas, women from the older generation contribute significantly to the family survival through fish vending but a strong culture of masculinity associated with physically strenuous work and with drinking subjects them to conjugal authority. Women's ability to mobilize resources to go overseas is limited by their lack of independent access to finances. Women emigrants mostly use loans from informal sources. Debt taken to finance migration but also previous debt in the family, hopes of stable incomes, demands arising from marriages and education of children or health expenditures prompt women to seek overseas employment. These conditions generate a form of circular transnationalism (see Piper, 2022). The risks associated with overseas employment are such that there is no certainty that women will be able to earn the expected incomes but even when they do, these earnings do not provide the basis for economic security because they are spent on one or other contingency. [6] A returnee migrant who worked as a fish vendor observed that she was able to earn as much selling fish but daily earnings tend to be frittered away while overseas earnings can be saved and used for a large contingency such as a

marriage or expenses on higher education.

In most instances, migration subjected women to hardships, exposed them to new worlds and allowed them to grow and learn. In some instances, they gained a measure of control over their lives and were able to pay for building houses, repay loans or provide for their children's education or marriages. In the absence of systemic support for migration, however, migrant women remained atomized and fragmented unable to mobilise a collective voice that could have been the basis of making claims on the state and to make a dent in gender norms. Within a patriarchal system, the absence of mothers' affected care for children and emotional bonds between them. Emigrant women usually leave children in the care of other women in the extended or marital families. Rarely do their husbands assume full responsibility for the care of their children. There were instances of emigrant women had returned without completing their contract because their children were not being cared for or their husbands had started to create 'trouble', a euphemism for excessive drinking and infidelity.

It is important, however, to avoid naturalizing women's child care and other reproductive responsibilities. As England (2005) underscores in her critique of claims that women's migration as care providers is harmful to poor countries and families within them as it deprives children of their mother's love and care, migration involves a trade-off between the presence of women at home and the money they are able to earn which may provide the basis of a better life for their children, for instance when they are invested in education and health. Long years of migrant employment takes a toll on the emotional bond between mothers' and their children, bringing into play another trade off, between the uncertain social security for the mother later in life and improved outcomes for their children in the present.

IV. ANXIETIES AROUND WOMEN'S LABOUR MOBILITY

In Saudi Arabia these women are treated cruelly, locked up and not given food… very badly abused. Their situation is pitiable. But it is different in Oman and the other countries. There they get a day off every week. On those days, many of them can be seen on the roads waiting for clients. They are doing this voluntarily. In this way, they make a lot of money

(Conversation with a hired car driver during fieldwork, July 27, 2013)

Women go from here hoping to make money. But they lose their way [get involved in sex work] invariably. They may not tell you about it.

(Priest, Coastal parish)

Women labour migrants are stereotyped in popular and policy representations either as abject - defenceless and lacking in agency - or as vested with illicit sexual agency and hence immoral. State officials defend restrictions in ways that are riddled with gendered assumptions about mobility and fears of loss of control over women. [7] A MOIA (now merged with the MEA) official said the lifting of restrictions would lead to 'unbridled movement' such that it would become impossible to control trafficking but also depicts migration as domestic workers as a channel to enter voluntarily into sex work.

The women who go to work for foreign sponsors I think they know what to expect. They do not go there believing that it will be a good situation. It is only women who have nobody to ask about them [a family or male provider] that go. They know what they will have to face over there. There are women who have complained to us from there. Sometimes on their return they come here. I feel that they are not genuine. In one case, I had forwarded her complaint but she came back on her own. She came here with three or four men… said one of them as her husband but during the conversation I could understand that he was not her husband. She wanted to go back. Because she came back before finishing her contract [on an exit pass] there was a problem with going back. They came here to find out a way for her to go. I don't think she was harassed. She may have been in a close relation with her sponsor and some problem developed so she feared for her life… If you have a proper family, you will not let the women go.

(Conversation, January 16, 2014).

The official poses the lack normative protection from marriage or family, as a condition that sets women adrift. The public sector overseas recruitment agencies in Kerala did not recruit MDWs until 2018, two years after they were mandated to do so by the government. A representative of a public sector recruiting agency described recruiting women domestics as 'a risk, I am not prepared to do anything that will demean the name of organization'.

Notably, the Indian government has been averse to intervene in support of MDWs. For instance, the Indian ambassador to the UAE refuted the need to raise minimum wages for domestic workers saying that it would increase illegal immigration and characterized those with problems as mostly illegal and illiterate (PTI, 2008). But the government has acted on the sentiments of an undifferentiated public.

Actually, the government policy is to discourage women's migration. There is a lot of cheating and exploitation going

on. There is no control.... If there is even a small problem it will have a big impact on our society. The impact when women go from a society like ours is quite different from when they go from a society that accepts free sex [a reference to the Philippines].

(Interview, Official public sector recruiting agency, 18 October 2014)

This perspective of women as symbols of national honour enables the state to curtail their rights as full citizens. It marginalizes this class of women migrants in cultural and economic terms by denying their rights to mobility and overseas employment.

V. WHO GOES? NEGOTIATING FAMILY PATRIARCHY

My daughter in law wanted to go but my son would not permit her. He said, 'we do not have to depend on the food she brings'. My daughter's husband also had said no

(Carmel, coastal fishing village, Trivandrum, July 2013).

People don't like it that the women go. 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 support. But most of the women from here, they go [overseas] against the wishes of their husbands

(Anila, Carmel's daughter-in-law, a Kudumbasree worker, July 2013).

Even in the coastal areas that have a culture of women's migration, that male breadwinner norm renders the agency of MDWs oppositional. Responses to migration opportunities 'are often determined by what happens in families and communities'; daughters or wives may be denied permission and family resource (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, 115). Even in societies that have witnessed large scale women's migration such as the Philippines there has been gendered push back from civil society (Fresnoza-Flot, 2012), but the state's refusal to reverse its approach and its investment in migrant women have empowered them and enabled women to mobilise and make claims on the state (Ireland, 2017, Parrenas, 2022). In Sri Lanka where state interventions incentivized women's migration between the 1980s and early 2000s, it also reduced stigma on migrant women (Oishi, 2005).

In the absence of a supportive policy environment for aspiring women from Kerala, family / community patriarchy becomes the key arbiter of who goes. In other words, who goes depends to a large extent upon women's social circumstances or how they position themselves in relation to marital provisioning. Women

were able to gain support for their migration plans with greater ease when serious failures of provisioning are made apparent. For instance, community workers would comment occasionally about emigrant women who they believed suffered from dereliction that 'there is nothing amiss in her going. At least by this means she will be able to survive'. Most women respondents claimed to have suffered from some form of failure of marital provisioning. Their narratives suggest a pattern. Marital provisioning broke down when the husband died, abandoned the family or otherwise refused or failed to provide support but was merely deferred when women went to tide over specific economic constraints. A third category of emigrant women were outside marital provisioning, mostly unmarried daughters. This typology is only a window into the conditions in which women are able to overcome cultural barriers and take up overseas employment.

Breakdown of provisioning

Breakdown of provisioning leading to overseas migration of women may occur in several ways. Whereas widowhood, divorce or separation shifts the burden of provisioning 'normally' on to the woman, husbands may refuse or otherwise fail to provide for the family. The latter failures are signalled most frequently when a husband fritters away his earnings on alcohol or is indifferent to the family's welfare but also when he is too old or infirm to work or has proved to be incompetent as a provider. Even when he fails to provide for the family, a husband may abuse his wife or be suspicious of her going out to work and create difficulties for her on a regular basis making it impossible for her to work locally.

Jumaila is a separated woman and mother of two girls. After her marriage at the age of 17 and two children by the time she was 19, she learnt that her husband had another wife and two children. 'For one or two years he would stay for six months seven months coming and going. Then I said I did not need a husband like this and we separated. But that man has not divorced me till today…' She left for her first job in Saudi Arabia in 1992 at the age of 29, several years after the separation, but she underscores it even as she is categorical about the aspirations that underpinned her agency.

I took the decision to go myself; I went. I had to raise my children. My husband does not give me anything, has no concern for me. I earned a living from wage work. I had to get my children married and educate them… If you work here, with a

day's wage you can take care of the daily needs of the house. If we go to the Gulf, for our children we can get five sovereigns or something to get them married or to educate them or to build them a shelter. That this is possible, I was sure in my mind so I went

(Jumaila, Muslim, Highland village, Trivandrum, July 6, 2013).

Emigrant domestic work allowed Jumaila to aspire to more than just a hand to mouth existence but the support of her parents who took care of her children in her absence allowed her to go.

Geetha's husband had taken a loan to buy an auto and instead of repaying it he 'went around drinking' and took more loans from moneylenders at high interest. The debt mounted.

The four of us [two daughters, husband and she] were in the kind of trouble that could only mean death. I secretly applied for a passport without telling my husband. When they came for police verification my husband came to know. Then I said, isn't it better than the four of us dying here. My husband used to drink heavily, now it's not so bad. When my daughter was studying for her plus two my husband came drunk and tore up her books

(Geetha, upper caste emigrant, Trivandrum city, April, 12, 2012).

In 1999, she went to Kuwait with the help of her husband's male cousin who worked there. Once her husband was persuaded, he helped her to go, chasing all the paper work and dealing with the agent on each occasion that she has changed jobs or gone to a new country in the past 13 years. Yet, she has learnt to rely on him less. 'But my husband, if I send him Rs 50,000 to pay off a debt, he will give Rs 30,000 and spend Rs 20,000 drinking. Now I pay the creditors directly'. Geetha is one of the few privileged castes overseas domestic workers in the sample and the only woman from her locality in such a job.

Lalitha had worked in Kuwait as a domestic worker for eight years when she returned in 2011. She went because her husband, who was in Kuwait, stopped sending money and she learnt that he had fallen into the company of other women. She says that the decision that she would go was taken by her friend, who convinced her that she must go in order to 'save' her life. To be able to go, Lalitha put her daughter in a boarding school and left her infant son in the care of her sister. Lalitha deflects the blame for her husband's profligacy on to his women companions.

When I went there, I saw, through the phone these women [pause] if they get one person's number, then somehow, they will pull them into their trap. So, I

endured a lot [because her husband was disloyal to her]. My mother-in-law was there, she said, 'send some money I will take a visa'. Mother-in-law did not help [with raising money]. She will not help… I will be able to live so I managed some money here, Rs 1 lakh, took the visa and went there. I got beaten up [by her husband]. So many women were there to keep him company so I got a lot of beatings, that's how I became ill…

(Interview, Coastal village, August 11, 2013)

For Lalitha saving her marriage is equal to saving her life indicating the shame and degradation of separation. Thus, it is important that her husband appear as the victim (of other women) in the narrative.

Kochumaria presents her husband as incapable of being the provider. Her gold was pledged to run the household expenses, when her husband tried to start a business on a loan and failed. As the debt increased, she started working locally as a domestic worker. 'I told my husband, I go daily for Rs 1500 a month, if I go to Dubai there will be more salary. That way, we can solve our problem. Let me try to go?' Her husband would not hear of it. She persisted, mobilized support from her aunt who was working as a cleaning supervisor in Dubai to get him to agree. Her parents told her that her husband should be the one to go.

But my husband, it's not just about speaking, he has no experience of going anywhere, even at home he is silent. If you know a 'trade' then it is alright to go. But somebody who does not know, if you send him and he suffers If he goes out, he will be like that, he does not have education but also, he does not know how to get along with people and go out and work. Then he was [a] skeleton, not well built so he would not have had the health to work. There it is hot, cold, to adapt to all that, my husband does not have the ability

(Kochumaria, Latin Catholic emigrant, coastal village, July 9, 2013).

Kochumaria's mother takes care of her children in her absence though her husband is present. She is waiting to go to Singapore as a housemaid for which she had been interviewed.

Deferred provisioning

Deferred provisioning arises when the husband does not vacate the provider's position altogether or may expect to regain it once a situation is redressed. Women's migration is conceived of as part of family strategies to meet exigencies that arise at specific junctures such as daughters' marriages, expensive higher education for children, debts to be paid off or a house to be built or renovated. Typically, also provisioning is deferred when

women go because men fail to get a visa or because 'housemaid' visas are cheaper compared to that for male workers. In this case, women's migration may open the doors to an overseas job for their husbands or for their sons. Provisioning may be deferred also when women live overseas with their husbands but their salaries from domestic work are too substantial.

Shanti feels the need to explain why her husband did not object when she decided to go to Oman, '[h]e did not say anything… Why because there was a girl to be married. If I had stayed here, what would we have done? Because of that he did not say anything. He gave me permission to go'. Her husband is a daily wage worker. According to Shanti, he did not attempt to go overseas himself, 'because he does not know how to read and write. What will he do there?' Shanti has been receiving offers from agents and would like to go again in order to be able to renovate her house. Her previous savings were exhausted on her daughter's marriage – she gave one and a half lakhs in cash and 10 sovereigns of gold. However, she is constrained because her daughter, who managed the home during her previous absence, has shifted to her husband's home. She says to be able to go overseas, she will first have to make some arrangement for the care of her husband and son.

Lateefa's husband tried to go to the Gulf two or three times. He sold all the property her mother had given her but could go only as far as Bombay. As he could not get a visa, he then suggested that she should go. 'Everybody is going. You also go… Because he said that I went'. She turned to her mother for financial help. She left for Bombay at the age of 21 leaving her 10-month-old boy and a four-year-old girl in her mother's care. She almost lost hope during the two months wait in Bombay but got a visa to Saudi Arabia.

I had lost everything. A measure of rice, I did not have the means to buy… I had not worked here [her natal village] before. My brothers were in business. They had the means to live. Here, where I was born, to do wage labour was demeaning. My brothers were starting to do well. They started to keep a distance from me, I felt… At the time, everybody was going to the Gulf. If I went, I would at least have the status of a Gulf kari

(Interview, July 5, 2013, Highland village).

Rarely do women domestic workers live overseas with their husbands, but those who do may straddle the space of deferred provision. As an overseas worker himself, the husband may be reluctant to acknowledge the full importance of his wife's

contribution. Anwar's sponsor-employer had provided the 'housemaid' visa for Anwar's wife, Sakina, to go to Kuwait on the arrangement that she would work outside and not for him. This is illegal and is done on what is referred to as a 'free' visa, which entails the sale of the visa by the sponsor so that a worker is free to negotiate her employment on the 'open' market. Sakina had been working 'outside' for several Malayalee families on a part-time basis, when last year the sponsor told Anwar that he wanted her to work for him. To avoid this Anwar found her another sponsor. 'I took her there with me so that she could live with me and not to make her work'. Going overseas on a 'free' visa is an expensive means of enabling family life overseas for a blue-collar male worker. Sakina earns between Rs 30,000 and Rs 40,000 a month, much more than she would earn working full time for a sponsor but more importantly it is also likely to be more than what Anwar earns as an office boy and driver to an advocate. Her visa cost around Rs one lakh and must be renewed for a similar sum every two years. Renting a living space is expensive in Kuwait and there are other living expenses to be met. The woman's income is crucial for the couple to generate a significant savings. Sakina and Anwar, a young couple, have been able to use their savings to renovate the old house in a highland village in Trivandrum, where their children live with Anwar's parents.

Women outside marital 'protection'

It was rare for women to take up overseas work on their own initiative unrelated to marital provisioning. Most of the women respondents were married when they first migrated. In the 1980s and 1990s, my data suggests, younger women below the age of 30 went more frequently than they do today. This category includes daughters who assume the burden of their parents to get siblings educated or married or to provide for their own marriages. Majida was only 18 years old in 1995, when she took up domestic work in Kuwait. Her father sold fish for a living. 'He did not have the means to get us married.' Majida may be described as precocious in her sense of filial responsibility.

My aunt was there. 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 must buy five cents of land, my sister must get married, after that must, one by one in the family must get to a secure position. That was why I went. I

spent Rs 30,000 to go. Even a loan of Rs 10, I was scared of then. That me! took Rs 30,000 as a loan and went.

She spent 13 years working for a single Arab family after running away from her first employer because of acute physical violence. 'I suffered a lot of physical abuse… After a month and several days, they did not pay my salary… I was really upset. At home so much debt. Then I thought, some people who come to the Gulf countries go crazy and run away. We blame them [in Kerala thinking]. 'Why can't they stay? What arrogance?' I thought all this'.

Bincy had grown up in a coastal village watching women leave for foreign shores. In 1989, when she was 21 years old, she went to Dubai motivated by a sense of adventure but her visit lasted only a month as she was unable to cope with the rigors of paid housework. 'I did not know anything at the time', she said. Her brother was in Dubai and he interceded with her employer to let her go. Seven years later, she returned to Dubai on a 'free' visa and found work there as a bar attendant. 'There is no salary, it's all in tips, [we] can make a lot of money. I stayed outside, a rented room… But I did not save anything... No, I did not send money home'. She earned around 1000 Dirhams a month, which is significantly higher than the wages of a domestic worker at the time but spent it all on good food and on the things she liked. She had an interreligious marriage in Dubai and came back after five years.

Maria's second sojourn to Dubai in 1990 (at the age of 26) was to make money. By this time, she had lost her parents and her younger siblings were in the care of her maternal aunt. In 1986 when she left her coastal village for Kuwait to work as a domestic worker her father had made all the arrangements. The second time she went on a tourist visa sourced through an agent who had arranged with her knowledge for her to do sex work. 'But it was not like I thought. It is very difficult. I had to take sometimes 18 customers a day. I could not do that'. She ran away with the help of a Malayalee man whose acquaintance she had made, lived with him for a little more than a year; had a son and returned home when he told her that he could no longer stay with her. Her partner was already married and had a family in Kerala. When her son was a year and a half, she returned to Dubai to do sex work and continued to go over the next ten years. In 2007, she went to Israel illegally and worked as a domestic worker.

The younger generation of girls

may have less reason to seek overseas employment; they are relatively better educated than their mothers' were and have better opportunities locally. Susanna, a return migrant had said, '[h]ere if a girl works in a shop, these days she can get at least Rs 6000. In the Gulf, now she may get Rs 10,000… Why should they go for that slave labour?' Annie's younger daughter who did not complete school earns Rs 9000 a month in a food processing unit in the city and drives to work on a two-wheeler she bought on a loan. The daughter of a returnee had a contract job as a ground staff for an airline. A few among the daughters of returnees or overseas workers were training to be nurses, teachers or pharmacists or doing computer courses. Second, the profile of jobs that young women may take up in the Middle East is more diverse now – hotel waitresses, helpers in schools, hospital assistants, shop assistants and store supervisors. One respondent had been a swimming instructor and one a coast guard. A third aspect is the rising aspirations for jobs in the industrialised countries – in the care sector, which may include elder and child care, as shop assistants, factory work or in retail. Single women or young women with their husbands from some of the coastal villages work in Italy and London or were in touch with agents who had promised them visas to Canada or Australia.

Failures of Provisioning and Women's Framing of their Agency

The circumstances in which women take up overseas jobs are considerably more diverse than popular, policy or even academic narratives allow for. However, in seeking social legitimacy for their migration plans, women may highlight provisioning failures. In practice, they strategized in diverse ways to obtain consent to go and to raise resources for migration. Geetha is not alone in manipulating her husband to obtain his consent. Women who fear refusal by their husbands' but are determined to go had withheld information to various extents. Thangamma said her husband was in northern Kerala with a fishing team. 'I got him to come back the day before I left and told him… If I tell him [in advance], he will create trouble, talk unnecessarily and drink heavily'. A woman whose husband was constantly suspicious of her (samshayarogam) and would not allow her to work even locally left from her brother's house, informing her husband on the phone only just before leaving for the airport.

Women migrants defined and articulated their preference for

overseas work with clarity. They were not under any illusion about the risks or the returns from overseas jobs. Those who received salaries that were not significantly higher than what they may earn in Kerala, echoed Jumaila's view that an overseas job enabled them to mobilize their earnings into substantial savings whereas at home their earnings would dissipate in no time. Thus, the refusal to recognize women's agency as in the dominant narrative on women's emigration in Gaddhama is a refusal of emigrant women's own perspectives on their movement.

But emigrant women framed their agency in more complex terms. Table 3 shows that the overwhelming majority of women made the decision to go overseas by themselves. Even when they were emphatic that they had made the decision to go i.e., that they did not come under pressure to go from their families, they sought also to underplay the element of 'choice' in their decision. Break-down of marriage makes it relatively easy for emigrant women workers to avoid social disapproval as it is seen as depriving women of 'choice' or options. Thus, it tempered the oppositional character of women's agency. When they have spouses, the emigration of women workers is more tolerated than viewed as socially legitimate. Yet, as the narratives demonstrate, the circumstances that defer provisioning may obscure women's agency because women are seen to act in accordance with their husbands' decisions.

In contrast, the agency of unmarried girls is markedly oppositional even when in specific cases they may evoke sympathy. Their narratives signal the costs for women who step into the shoes of the male provider while remaining outside marital provisioning. Though their agency is not set in opposition (or allegiance) to conjugal authority, an important cost may be in terms of the conventional form of marriage. Majida says that in going overseas she did not think about herself but only about her siblings. She believes that she is fortunate to be married at the age of 31. Late by the standards of her locality and her community and long after her younger sister's marriage, a chance encounter in Kuwait led to her marriage. Bincy had a 'love' marriage when she was 30, long after her younger sister was married. A few of the women in this category had remained single.

The life trajectories of women indicate the possibilities that migration opens up. Lateefa went overseas to retrieve the financial

ground her husband had lost but stayed for the better part of 30 years. On her first vacation, she walked out on her husband when he insinuated that she had been sleeping with her sponsor thus moving out of deferred provisioning to breakdown. In terms of the conventional morality, there have been some deeply ambiguous moments in Lateefa migration trajectory, for instance after her divorce she had a boyfriend who reneged on his promise to marry her. Lateefa remarried eventually. She met her husband a Tamil man in Dubai and says he married her in full knowledge of her past and has 'looked after her as he would something most precious (ponnupole or like gold)', thus marking her return to conjugal protection.

Migration opens up diverse trajectories and new space for the negotiation of women's agency in ways that stretch the boundaries of a single category, enable women to move from one to another in the course of their migration and even to straddle more than one space at the same time. Women exercised agency in making decisions but also executing them. However, migrant women's framing of their agency in ways that highlight lack of choice is a response to the socio-cultural and legal contexts. In the exercise or framing of their agency, migrant women avoid confrontation with dominant patriarchal power choosing instead to prize open space on terms that may be considered legitimate within the system. Migrant women do not seek any kind of radical break with patriarchy. This is most evident in their aspirations for their daughters and the significant investments in dowries to get their daughters or siblings married in socially appropriate ways. Thus, emigrant women's responses to patriarchal barriers against mobility correspond to a form of 'bargaining with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988). This approach leaves open the dangers of reinforcing patriarchal power as is apparent in the stigma that migrant women are subject to upon return.

VI. CONCLUSION

Feminists have pointed out that the politics underlying migration comes to the fore when we ask what interests are served when certain groups of people migrate for particular purposes and acknowledge the power relations that underpin the migration flows and experiences of specific social groups (Silvey 2004, 6). Migration scholarship on Kerala assumes that the male dominated flow is a 'natural' outcome of the dominant division of labour in families in Kerala. Such work

has served to mask the power relations that underpin migration flows.

Policy barriers against women's migration reduce the scope for women to migrate through regular routes; they act in accordance with and strengthen social norms that advance marital control over women's sexuality and mobility and promote cultural stereotypes of MDWs as sexually permissive. A paternalist policy strengthens family patriarchy as the key arbiter in deciding whether and in what circumstances women may take up overseas employment. In response, women seeking support for their migration plans by manipulating family patriarchy, highlighting provisioning failures and moving strategically to mobilize information, resources and allies.

This paper draws attention to how aspiring women and migrants intercede in the patriarchal dynamic of bargaining in the family in order to create the space to go. In a cultural environment marked by suspicion of women's autonomous mobility, the compulsion to earn a livelihood deprives women of 'choice' and therefore tempers the oppositional nature of their agency. My reading of their narratives is that emigrant women workers create the space to go by grounding their claims to mobility and overseas work on socially acceptable terms – the failures of marital provisioning. Their act of strategically muting their agency by itself may be seen as a carefully thought-out expression of agency. By no means, however, do these women seek to overturn patriarchy. They seek overseas employment for most part it would seem to improve their lives withing the system or to conform to its demands – to obtain money to pay dowries and to provide for health and education for children or other family members. Thus, their access to overseas employment does not empower them to resist patriarchal power upon return; on the contrary, they are subject to its corroding impact through stigma.

NOTES

[1] The public sector recruitment agency, Overseas Development and Employment Promotion Consultants, ODEPC was set up in 1977. The state set up a department to overseas the affairs of migrants – Non Residents Keralites Affairs (NORKA) and Roots in 2002 to interface between migrants and the government. NORKA has instituted several welfare measures for migrants and returnees. The state through the Bureau of Economics also commissioned studies to understand the utilisation of remittances (GoK, 1987, 1994).

[2] Questions include the transfer of gender norms implicitly through migrant men (Joseph et al.2022) and concerns of non-migrant wives of migrant men (Zachariah et al 2001).

[3] Officials in the Travancore

government are said to have lamented that 'the great majority of girls… regard their education, not as something of cultural value in itself, but a direct means of securing employment and competing with men in the open markets.' (The Travancore Educational Committee Report, cited in Jeffrey, 2005: 134).

[4] The security deposit is meant to be used for repatriation expenses if the need arises.

[5] Over 2,70,000 Indonesian's migrated out in 2023 (https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/new-protect-project-supports-women-migrant-workers-and-children-indonesia). Going by previous years, when about 30 % of migrants were domestic workers, about 80,000 migrants may have been domestic workers in 2023.

[6] The Indian government's minimum wage for MDWs was Rs 12000 a month at the time of field work in 2013.

[7] Oishi (2005: 80) notes that a senior Indian official contended that the best way to protect Indian workers from abuse was not to let them go at all.

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