



Women Migration from South Asia: Comparative Perspectives on Policies

Sadananda Sahoo ^{a++*} and Feroz Khan ^{b#}

^a School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University,
New Delhi, India.

^b Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT), New Delhi, India.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9734/sajsse/2024/v21i9881>

Open Peer Review History:

This journal follows the Advanced Open Peer Review policy. Identity of the Reviewers, Editor(s) and additional Reviewers, peer review comments, different versions of the manuscript, comments of the editors, etc are available here: <https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/122577>

Original Research Article

Received: 28/06/2024

Accepted: 03/09/2024

Published: 06/09/2024

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to examine the existing policies on women from one of the largest migrants sending corridors (South Asia) to one of the largest migration destination corridors of world (GCC countries) and provide a comparative picture. Migration needs to be safe and orderly as envisaged in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). The recent global migration has seen women from various regions, particularly South Asia, making their presence in every sector, from high-skilled professional to low skill domestic helps. Women from South Asia cross borders to look for better opportunities, to take care of their families' economic security back in their native countries and for their personal growth. Indeed, their movements are not free as it appears. Both men and women have to go through a long and important legal authority process to migrate. These legal processes have to be clear from native and host countries, importantly, when it comes to the issue of women's migration, they face a double legal burden compared to their male counterparts.

⁺⁺Associate Professor;

[#] Fellow;

^{*}Corresponding author: Email: ssahoo@ignou.ac.in;

Cite as: Sahoo, Sadananda, and Feroz Khan. 2024. "Women Migration from South Asia: Comparative Perspectives on Policies". *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics* 21 (9):47-57. <https://doi.org/10.9734/sajsse/2024/v21i9881>.

This legal process takes the form of protective policies enacted by the native government. The policies are enacted to protect women from exploitation. Nonetheless, the central question that arises is whether these policies were to protect migrant women, or whether they are creating barriers and restricting or limiting their free movement. The paper uses push and pull theory of Everett S. Lee (1966) where migration occurs in a host of positive, negative and intervening factors. The study is based on secondary data from national and international organisations. There are no coherent migration data available any South Asian countries. However, this paper analysed available data from the various sources directly and indirect available. The policies of many of these South Asian countries still poses barriers for women to migrate. The impact the overall migration experience owing to cultural -social and economic factors needs more proactive policies.

Keywords: South Asia;international migration; gulf countries council; women migration; migration policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia is the largest migrant sending zone in the world. The UN DESA (2020). reported that about 43.4 million people from the sub-region live outside their country of origin, making it the sub-region with the highest number of emigrants globally. Ten (10) of the 21 largest migration corridors in Asia emanate from Southern Asia; with four (4) involving intra-regional movement (Bangladesh to India, Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan to Pakistan, and India to Pakistan), while six (6) lead from the region to GCC states (India to the United Arab Emirates, India to Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia, Nepal to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia to Saudi Arabia) [1].

South Asia is the largest migrant sending zone in the world. The UN DESA (2020). reported that about 43.4 million people from the sub-region live outside their country of origin, making it the sub-region with the highest number of emigrants globally. Ten (10) of the 21 largest migration corridors in Asia emanate from Southern Asia; with four (4) involving intra-regional movement (Bangladesh to India, Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan to Pakistan, and India to Pakistan), while six (6) lead from the region to GCC states (India to the United Arab Emirates, India to Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia, Nepal to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia to Saudi Arabia) [1].

South Asia which is traditionally a male dominated society and the labour force participation among women is very less, therefore showing a huge gender gap. The Global Gender Gap 2024 by World Economic Forum mentioned that the gender parity score of 38.8% communicates low labour-force participation rates for women and significant gender disparities in leadership roles.

International migration works as a push factor to overcome this gender gap.

Women migration encounter increasing vulnerability as compared to their male counterparts that involve human trafficking and other forms of exploitation at workplace [2]. As the phenomenon is new, there is need for better policy that facilitate and promote safe and orderly migration. The main objective of this paper is to examines various recent policies with regards to female migrants across South Asia and hence provide comparative perspective.

Migration is a result of many factors and there are no single conceptual or theoretical frame that can sufficiently explain these phenomena. However, more broadly this paper tried to use the push and pull theory of Everett S. Lee (1966) where he explains how the migration occurs in a host of positive, negative and intervening factors. Women migration to Gulf countries are governed by lack of employment back home (push) economic opportunity in the destination countries (pull), social network. Level of skills, geographical proximity and transportation and visa facilities (intervening).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data from national and international organisations. There are no coherent migration data available any South Asian countries. However, this paper analysed available data since 2000 to till date from the various sources directly and indirectly available. These data sources are from world bank IOM, ILO, country specific data and select studies. The reason for choosing major migrant sending countries in South Asia can provide more useful insights on policy perspectives as there are many lessons to be learned as they share socio-cultural and similar economic profile.

3. THE BROAD PICTURE

In the following section a broad global picture is provided to contextualise the women migration in the South Asia. There are many contrasting features of women migration from other regions as compared to South Asia owing to its low labour force participation as a result of socio-cultural and economic structure of society under which the policies are enacted.

3.1 Women Migration

The trajectory of women's migration has undergone significant transformations over the past five decades, reflecting a nuanced interplay of societal shifts, policy dynamics, and economic imperatives. The 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a subtle relegation of women to the background in migration studies, with the term "migrants and their families" primarily encapsulating male migrants and their spouses and children [3]. The emergence of the women's movement challenged this invisibility, prompting a re-evaluation of assumptions about women's roles, passivity, and domesticity in the migration process.

The evolution of women's migration becomes more pronounced in the global context. By the year 2000, women constituted approximately 49 percent of global migrants, marking a substantial increase from 46.6 percent in 1960 [4,5]. Notably, this proportion rose to 51 percent in more developed regions, with Europe exhibiting the highest concentrations (ibid) [6]. The decision-making process behind women's international migration is multifaceted, encompassing individual attributes, family considerations, and societal factors.

In the broader context of global labour markets, women migrants are intricately entwined with the framework of 'neoliberal governmentality,' experiencing feminized forms of work flexibilization and informality underpinning macro-economic development projects. Temporary migration, serving as a disciplinary practice for migrant subjectivity, reflects the gender-specific labour markets and stringent migration policies faced by women worldwide. Despite the highly gendered nature of migration, gender often remains overlooked as a separate analytical category in migration and development policies [7].

As women migrate for better opportunities, the phenomenon of split families emerges,

challenging traditional notions of migration and family reunification. Restrictive migration regimes and the discouragement of settlement by destination countries impede family reunification, with migration policies often controlling and policing women migrants' bodies. Even when family reunification is not explicitly prohibited, the nature of jobs available to women migrants, such as in care work, poses significant challenges, including long working hours, low pay, and limited access to benefits (ibid). The intricate interplay of historical shifts, societal expectations, and economic imperatives underscores the complex landscape of women's migration, necessitating a nuanced understanding within the realms of social science research.

3.2 Women's Migration to Gulf Countries from South Asia

Women overseas workers migration from Asia in general and South Asia in particular to Gulf countries is not a new phenomenon. Since the oil boom in the 1970s, Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain significant number of migrant workers including women from Asian countries has contributed to meet the demand for labour in these countries [8,9]. Migrant from Asian countries has contributed in the Gulf countries to meet their demand of labour of their growing oil economy [10,11]. The booming revenues from oil export led to massive infrastructure and construction, services, health, and domestic workers sectors. To meet the demand of labour shortage of these sectors millions of migrant workers are migrating from South Asian countries. Importantly, at the one end the local labour population are not sufficient to meet the demand of growing economy in the Gulf, and at the other end the tradition of the countries in general restricts their local women to participate in the workforce. These two factors along with the other that discussed above have provided the opportunities form women migrant workers from South Asian countries to look for the new working opportunities in Gulf countries.

3.3 Occupation Categories of Women Migrant Workers in Gulf from South Asia

3.3.1 Domestic Work

Domestic work is not confined to female workers, rather both male and female get recruited in this

sector. Nonetheless, the sector is more dominated by the women and largely by the migrant [12]. As per the IOM report, there are an estimated 67 million domestic workers in the world, of which 80 per cent are women and 11.5 million migrant workers.

Women migrant workers either get engaged in skilled works or unskilled workers. The professional gets engaged in the category of skilled workers whereas the unskilled women workers generally get engaged in domestic work. This sector attracts a large number of women migrant workers. First, it does not require a high qualification, and second the increasing demand of housemaids, has promoted this sector, both at local and international. The availability of workers from South Asian countries have contributed in the flourishing of this sector in Gulf countries. Moreover, it is generally seen that low skill and less educated women, mostly from low-income countries or families engage in the sector.

3.3.2 Rise of service sector

Service sector appears to be one of the fastest growing sectors in the global economy [13]. It provides many opportunities both for male and female workers. It appears that in developing countries the sector is one of the vital sources of employment and income for millions of women and migrant workers. The migrant workers get engaged in health care services, hospitality, and education. Interestingly, the high demand for health care services, as well as in hospitality from Gulf countries is largely met by the women migrant workers from Asia.

Migrant women, primarily get engaged in meeting the high demand of nursing services in the Gulf countries. Beyond nursing, migrant women contribute significantly in the areas related to allied health professional like taking care of old people, children and patient at home. Migrant women also get engaged in frontline roles in hospitality sector including receptionists, guest service agents, and housekeeping staff. Many South Asian women work as chefs, cooks, and kitchen staff, enriching the gastronomic offerings in the hospitality sector. Migrant women also get engaged in maintaining the cleanliness and hygiene standards of hotels and other accommodation facilities.

Migrant women from Asia have immensely contributed in meeting the demand of workers in Gulf countries and their regional development

and cultural diversity. The income they earn by providing their services also contributed to their native countries in the form of remittances and investment. The migrant workers also contributed in the form of transferring knowledge at their native place. Nonetheless, when it comes to the protection and security of migrant workers particularly engaged in domestic workers and healthcare industries, they have to face many challenges.

3.4 Challenges Faced by Migrant Women Workers

The invisible nature of their work many times make the working condition of domestic workers more miserable and exploitative [14]. Studies, on domestic works indicates that only few percentages of domestic workers fall under preview of general labour laws living majority that remain uncovered. The vulnerability of migrant domestic workers is linked to lack of knowledge and education [15]. The lack of knowledge related to the language and culture of the host country further increase their vulnerabilities in the host country. Other factors that possess challenges to the migrant domestic workers include the precarious nature of the recruitment process complexes the vulnerability of women migrant domestic workers. This process involves navigating the complexities of acquiring a passport, securing a visa, submitting contractual agreements, and fulfilling associated fees. Many women migrants, due to their limited literacy, fail to comprehend the intricacies of these agreements, rendering them susceptible to exploitation.

Similarly, migrant workers involve in healthcare and allied sectors are also seem vulnerable group. Notably, there is a recurrent issue of falling prey to deceptive recruiting agents, compelling many to incur additional fees for the prospect of overseas employment. Despite adherence to national norms, the recruitment of care workers often transpires through private agencies or informal channels for household employment. The vulnerability of healthcare workers, constituting a subset of care workers, is intricately tied to their skillsets. Skilled care workers, when denied opportunities to apply their competencies, find themselves compelled to engage in household work, consequently devaluing their skills and receiving inadequate remuneration [16]. Conversely, instances exist where unskilled individuals, lacking proficiency in reading contracts or possessing nursing

qualifications, are erroneously recruited for care work in private residences. Numerous studies underscore the substandard working conditions experienced by migrant workers, exposing them to verbal and physical abuse [17,18,19]. Such mistreatment often arises due to perceived inefficiencies in executing professional tasks, prompting employers to impose harsher conditions and overtime work, further diminishing the recognition accorded to their labour.

Low levels of education among migrant workers often preclude them from advocating for their rights, and the absence of legal support within host countries restricts their access to justice [20]. Research consistently indicates that care workers employed outside private residences contend with extended working hours, minimal or no leave provisions, and heightened turnover rates within private agencies due to an oversupply of labour, ultimately leading to diminished wages. It appears that the absence of embassy representation in host countries exposes migrant workers to increased susceptibility to exploitation. Diplomatic presence disparities among countries may result in inadequate collaboration between foreign missions, affecting decisions related to worker protection. The role of governments and their policies emerges as pivotal in safeguarding the well-being of migrant workers [21], emphasizing the necessity for robust protective measures to mitigate the multifaceted challenges encountered by this vulnerable demographic.

In the Gulf region, several countries adopt the 'Kafala System,' wherein individuals or companies hold sponsorship permits to employ foreign labour [22]. This system assigns legal status to the worker under the purview of a private citizen rather than the state. Critics have likened the Kafala System to modern slavery, citing its exploitative nature. Notably, under such a system, women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, often finding themselves residing in sponsors' households and becoming susceptible to various forms of abuse, including sexual exploitation.

Further, the Kafala system, entrenched within the legal frameworks of many Gulf countries, constitutes a distinctive structure delineating the relationship between migrant workers and their employers. This system profoundly impacts migrant workers within the Gulf countries, influencing their employment conditions, mobility, and overall well-being. Under the Kafala system,

the employer, referred to as the sponsor, has the prerogative to directly hire an individual or engage a private recruiting agent for the same purpose [23]. The sponsor bears the responsibility for covering travel expenses and providing accommodation for the worker. In the case of domestic workers, housing arrangements may manifest in dormitory-style accommodations or within the sponsor's residence. This arrangement inherently links the worker's residence and employment to the sponsoring individual or entity.

One notable feature of the Kafala system is the significant control it affords sponsors over workers' mobility and contractual matters. Workers typically require the sponsor's permission to terminate a contract, exit the host country, or even change or transfer jobs [24]. This aspect of the system introduces a layer of dependency on the sponsor, constraining the agency and autonomy of the migrant worker. The implications of the Kafala system extend beyond the contractual realm, permeating various aspects of migrant workers' lives. The requirement for sponsor approval for job changes or exits from the host country can lead to instances of exploitation and abuse, particularly when sponsors misuse their authority. Workers, particularly those in domestic roles, may find themselves in vulnerable positions due to the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in the system.

3.5 Protective Government Policies

It seems that to manage effectively and to safeguard women migrant from exploitation South Asian countries have implemented more restrictive measures rather formulating comprehensive policies to promote facilities for women migrants and protect them from abuse. South Asian, migration policies appear to designed to shield workers from exploitation. While both men and women appear encounter restrictive policies in South Asian countries, but when it comes to women migrant workers the restrictive policies get more tighten in comparison to male workers.

3.5.1 India

India has implemented a regulating policy specific to women migrant workers, classified within the purview of restrictive labour laws. This policy framework establishes a protective legal framework, facilitating the outbound migration of

women for employment under stipulated conditions. The Indian government permits female migration for work but imposes certain criteria, with heightened conditions for holders of Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports, particularly in the context of ECR countries.

In adherence to policy norms, the migration of female domestic workers is exclusively facilitated through state-operated recruiting agencies. These agencies include the Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs Roots (NORKA, Kerala), Overseas Development and Employment Promotion Consultant (ODEPC, Kerala), Overseas Manpower Corporation Ltd. (OMCL, Tamil Nadu), Uttar Pradesh Financial Corporation (UPFC, Uttar Pradesh), Overseas Manpower Company A.P. Ltd. (OMCAP, Andhra Pradesh), and Telangana Overseas Manpower Company Limited (TOMCOM, Telangana). Furthermore, the policy mandates that nurses seeking overseas employment in 18 ECR countries must obtain emigration clearance from the Protector of Emigrants (PoE). This regulatory structure underscores the meticulous oversight applied to specific categories of female migrant workers, ensuring compliance with predetermined procedures and safeguarding their interests within the international labour market.

3.5.2 Nepal

Nepal has witnessed a consistent rise in its out-migrating population, with historical patterns highlighting India as the predominant destination for Nepali migrant workers [25,26]. The emergence of the Gulf countries, fueled by the oil boom and economic liberalization, has expanded the horizons for Nepali labour, offering alternative destinations such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia [10]. Initially, stringent restrictions impeded women migrants, making it challenging for them to obtain permission to work abroad until the 1990s [27]. However, evolving economic dynamics, increased female education, and a growing demand for women in the labour market prompted the government to streamline the process, resulting in the formulation of laws tailored to women migrant workers, albeit with specific constraints.

The Foreign Employment Act of 1985 in Nepal marked a significant shift by permitting female workers to migrate, albeit subject to restrictive provisions [28,29]. The Act explicitly barred recruiting agencies from facilitating foreign

employment for children and women without the explicit consent of their guardians. A pivotal development occurred with the Second Amendment to the Act in 1998, which extended the permissions required for women and children to encompass the "permission of His Majesty's Government and guardians." Notably, the term "guardian" was delineated to include both the mother and father for unmarried women, with the husband assuming the role of the guardian for married women [30].

The Foreign Employment Act underscores the commitment to non-discrimination, asserting that "No gender discrimination shall be made while sending workers for foreign employment according to this Act." However, the provision acknowledges that specific demands from employer institutions may necessitate the fulfilment of gender-specific requests. Importantly, a proposed amendment in 2021 stipulates that first-time travellers require permission from guardians and local governments, introducing additional layers to the regulatory framework. The nuanced timeline of mobility clauses within the legislation indicates a strategic integration of both restrictive measures and non-discriminatory provisions in facilitating the outward mobility of female migrants from Nepal.

3.5.3. Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka stands out as a significant source of out-migrants, and the implementation of the open market economic policy in 1977 acted as a catalyst, fostering substantial emigration from the country. The relaxation policy regarding registration on departure for foreign employment played a pivotal role in incentivizing both male and female workers to explore opportunities beyond national borders [31]. While the initial phase of migration was characterized by short-term endeavours, this trend was largely attributable to the short-term nature of the employment sought by migrants during this period.

During the early 1980s, the majority of migrant workers were women, a pattern that persisted and intensified between 1993 and 1997, with women constituting 75 percent of the migrant population (ibid). Predominantly engaged in informal work, especially in the realm of domestic labour, women's participation in migration witnessed a subsequent decline due to shifts in national policies. The emphasis on encouraging

skilled workers over unskilled and casual workers, coupled with increases in minimum wages for domestic workers, served as deterrents to the flow of female workers into the international labour market.

The introduction of the Family Background Report (FBR) further constrained the migration of women workers from Sri Lanka. Enacted in 2007 by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Child Protection and implemented in July 2013 by the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, the FBR aimed to safeguard the well-being of children while simultaneously imposing restrictions on mothers migrating abroad for work [32]. Under the FBR, women migrating as domestic workers were required to document their reproductive and family history when applying for overseas jobs.

The FBR specified that mothers with older children (five years and above) were permitted to migrate for domestic work, provided alternative care arrangements were in place to ensure the welfare of children left behind. Initially applicable to women with children under the age of five, the FBR imposed a minimum age requirement for migrating women, varying based on destination countries. For instance, the age limit for Saudi Arabia was set at 25 years, while other Middle East countries were limited to 23 years, and all other countries to 21 years. Furthermore, the FBR capped the maximum age for all countries at 55 years, with subsequent revisions lowering the maximum age to 50 years in 2015, further reduced to 45 years in 2017. The latest revision in 2020 introduced two distinct categories in the form: one for females with children and another for females without children.

3.5.4 Pakistan

Pakistan exhibits one of the lowest rates of female labour participation globally, with the South Asian region similarly witnessing the country reporting the lowest female participation rate. The multifaceted reasons contributing to this low participation encompass factors such as inadequate education, limited skill acquisition, and the pervasive influence of the largely invisible informal sector. Notably, female involvement in overseas migration remains exceptionally minimal, as highlighted by an International Labour Organization (ILO) report. The data indicates that a mere 40,807 female workers engaged in overseas migration from 1971 to July 2019, representing a mere 0.4

percent of the overall migration during this extensive period.

The impediments faced by women in pursuing overseas employment are rooted in cultural, educational, and skill-related constraints. Decisions regarding seeking overseas employment opportunities are often contingent upon family determinations. Additionally, governmental policies in Pakistan do not actively encourage women to explore opportunities for overseas employment. Analogous to several other Asian nations, Pakistan's government enforces a restrictive age limit policy for women seeking overseas employment, particularly in the domestic work category, with the stipulated age limit set at 35 years. In certain exceptional cases, there may be a five-year age relaxation. Moreover, women are required to obtain consent from a male guardian, who may be a father, brother, husband, or son. In instances where a male guardian is unavailable, consent from a female guardian, such as a mother, is considered acceptable.

The predominant sectors for female migration include domestic work and nursing, with a noteworthy trend of Pakistani women predominantly migrating to Gulf countries. Cultural similarities and geographical proximity are cited as significant factors influencing this migration pattern. These gender-specific dynamics within the migration landscape highlight the intricate interplay of cultural norms, governmental policies, and familial influences shaping the engagement of Pakistani women in overseas employment opportunities.

3.5.5 Bangladesh

Bangladesh stands as a prominent labour supplier in South Asia, yet the representation of female migrants from the country within the overseas labour migration framework remains markedly low. According to the Migration Forum Asia (MFA) report, up until 2004, females constituted merely 1 percent of the total Bangladeshi overseas labour migrant population [33]. This scenario is predominantly attributed to a confluence of cultural, educational, skill-based, and policy-driven factors.

Historically, the regulation of overseas migration from Bangladesh was governed by the 1922 Emigration Act, facilitating temporary labour flows directly overseen by government agencies. However, with the escalating migration to Gulf

countries, the government enacted the Emigration Ordinance of 1982 to systematize labour migration. This ordinance marked a significant shift, delegating the responsibility of recruiting labour from the government to private recruiting agents. Subsequently, the government introduced additional regulatory frameworks, including the rules in 2002 and the Overseas Employment Policy of 2006.

Throughout the formulation of emigration policies, the stance towards women workers underwent multiple revisions, emerging as a substantial obstacle for women seeking overseas employment, particularly those in unskilled and semi-skilled categories. Initially, during the early phase of temporary migration, the government did not impose stringent policies. However, in 1981, a Presidential Order was implemented, restricting specific categories of female workers, particularly semi-skilled and unskilled women. This order delineated that skilled women could migrate as principal workers, while their semi-skilled and unskilled counterparts were barred from overseas employment. In 1997, a policy reinstated the ban on women migrants, exclusively allowing high-skill categories like doctors, engineers, and teachers, while prohibiting professions such as nurses, factory workers, and semi-skilled and unskilled women workers.

The policymakers revisited their stance in 1997 by lifting the imposed ban on migrant women, excluding domestic workers. Subsequently, in 2003, a system of minimum age for female migrant workers was introduced, permitting semi-skilled and unskilled female workers to seek overseas employment once they reached the age of 35. Over time, this minimum age criterion was revised downward to 25 years in 2006. Concurrently, the government-initiated training programs for women aspiring for overseas employment. Notably, restrictions on unmarried women were gradually lifted, introducing significant modifications for policymakers addressing semi-skilled and unskilled female migrant workers.

3.6 Comparative Picture

The migration of women for work from South Asia reflects the significant influence of government policies on female labour migration. In Nepal, the surge in women migrating abroad for work from a mere 161 between 1985 and 2001 to over 21,000 by 2014-2015 underscores

the socio-economic pressures driving this trend [34]. Despite this increase, the restrictive policies in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan have played a critical role in discouraging or reducing the migration of women. For instance, in Sri Lanka, government policies aimed at promoting skilled migration and raising minimum wages for domestic workers have led to a decline in the proportion of female migrants since 2008, despite the high demand for domestic workers abroad [35]. Similarly, in Pakistan, the imposition of strict regulations, such as setting the minimum age for women to work abroad at 35 under the 1979 Emigration Rules, has severely limited female migration, with women constituting only 0.21% of total migrants by 2018 [36,37].

Conversely, Bangladesh offers a comparative example of how policy liberalization can facilitate increased female migration. Although Bangladesh initially imposed bans and restrictions on the migration of less-skilled women, these policies were gradually lifted, leading to a significant rise in the number of women migrating for work, particularly to the Middle East [38]. By 2013, women accounted for 13% of all outbound migrants, a stark contrast to Pakistan's low female migration rates. This comparative analysis highlights how restrictive government policies in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan have discouraged women from migrating for work, while more liberal policies in Bangladesh have enabled a growing number of women to seek employment abroad. The experiences of these countries underscore the critical role that government policies play in shaping the migration patterns of women, particularly in the context of South Asia.

On the contrary India has emerged as a significant source of migrant workers, with substantial numbers of both male and female workers seeking employment abroad. In 2023, data from the e-Migrant portal indicated that 14,259 women leaving India for work, with 11,892 heading to Saudi Arabia, 1,031 to Oman, 554 to Kuwait, 488 to Qatar, 204 to Bahrain, and 90 to the UAE. Additionally, the migration of nurses was notable, with 5,584 nurses emigrating from India. Of these, 3,321 went to Kuwait, 2,146 to Saudi Arabia, 39 to the UAE, 27 to Oman, 18 to Qatar, 14 to Bahrain, and one to Iraq [39]. This data underscores the significant presence of Indian women, especially in care services, within the global labour market.

India's migration policies reflect a nuanced approach that both regulates and facilitates the outflow of labour. While the country imposes certain age restrictions on female migrants, it does not discourage women from seeking employment abroad. Instead, India promotes legal channels for migration, particularly for those who are less educated or possess limited skills, through the Emigration Check Required (ECR) category. This strategy aims to curb illegal migration while encouraging lawful and fair migration routes. Additionally, India's efforts to ensure the well-being of its migrant workers are evident in initiatives such as pre-departure training, legal authentication of recruiting agents, and insurance provisions. Through bilateral agreements, India also negotiates for minimum wage guarantees for its workers and provides support through its missions abroad in times of need.

4. CONCLUSION

South Asian countries in recent years experience high level of unemployment; In addition, there are increasing conflicts within and outside the countries across the region making the migration more vulnerable in general and women migration in particular. Since the women migration in the region is not just a subject matter of government policies, but host of other factors such as socio-cultural and economic capacity, migrant network etc. it is very important to create an enabling policy to facilitate safe and orderly migration as envisaged in the Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Migration (GCM).

South Asian countries are also some of the top recipients of migrant remittances which further helps the local economy such as rural infrastructure, education and rural development of many lower middle class and poor section of people. Women who are vulnerable migrants must be taken care of with legal protection in one hand and the enabling policies for safe migration on the other hand so that they can overcome the social-cultural restrictions that hinder the migration. The policies of many of these South Asian countries still poses barriers for women to migrate. The impact the overall migration experience owing to cultural -social and economic factors needs more proactive policies.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models

(ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests or non-financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. International Organization for Migration. World Migration Report 2024. International Organization for Migration; 2024. Available:<https://brazil.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11496/files/documents/2024-05/world-migration-report-2024.pdf>, accessed on 26th August 2024
2. Christou A, Kofman E. Gender and migration: IMISCOE short reader (2022;123). Springer Nature. Available:<https://link.springer.com/bookseries/13502>.
3. Boyd M, Grieco E. Women and migration: Incorporating gender into international migration theory; 2014.
4. Martin SF. Women and migration. In Consultative Meeting on Migration and Mobility and how this movement affects Women. Malmo; 2004.
5. Donato KM, Gabaccia D. Gender and international migration. Russell Sage Foundation; 2015.
6. Bastia T, Piper N. Women migrants in the global economy: A global overview (and regional perspectives). Gender and Development. 2019;27(1):15-30.
7. Docquier F, Lowell BL, Marfouk A. A gendered assessment of highly skilled emigration. Population and Development Review. 2009;35(2):297–321. Available:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2009.00277.x>
8. Oommen GZ. Gulf migration, social remittances and religion: The changing dynamics of Kerala Christians. New Delhi: India Centre for Migration; 2016. Available:https://mea.gov.in/images/attach/II_Ginu_Zachariah_Oommen.pdf.
9. Asis MM. When men and women migrate: Comparing gendered migration in Asia. In United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)

- Consultative Meeting on Migration and Mobility and How this Movement Affects Women. Malmö, Sweden. 2003;2-4.
10. Wickramasekara P. South Asian Gulf migration to the Gulf: A safety valve or a development strategy? *Migration and Development*. 2016;5(1):99-129.
 11. Gurucharan G. The Future of Migration from India Policy, Strategy and Modes of Engagement, India Centre for Migration Ministry of External Affairs; 2013. Available:https://www.mea.gov.in/images/attach/I_G_Gurucharan.pdf
 12. Jarallah Y. Domestic labor in the Gulf countries. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*. 2009;7(1):3-15.
 13. Elder S, Smith A. Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges. Geneva, Suiza: International Labour Office; 2010.
 14. Chin CB. Visible bodies, invisible work: State practices toward migrant women domestic workers in Malaysia. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*. 2003;12(1-2):49-73.
 15. Silvey R, Parreñas R. Precarity chains: Cycles of domestic worker migration from Southeast Asia to the Middle East. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 2020;46(16):3457-3471.
 16. Holliday J. Skilled to care, forced to work? Recognizing the skills profiles of migrant domestic workers in ASEAN amid forced labour and exploitation; 2023.
 17. Sherry VN. Bad dreams: Exploitation and abuse of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Human Rights Watch. 2004;15.
 18. Sonmez S, Apostolopoulos Y, Tran D, Rentrop S. Human rights and health disparities for migrant workers in the UAE. *Health and Hum. Rts*. 2011;13:17.
 19. Parreñas RS. *Unfree: Migrant domestic work in Arab States*. Stanford University Press; 2021.
 20. Auwal MA. Ending the exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf. *Fletcher F. World Aff*. 2010;34:87.
 21. Sharma V, Saraswati LR, Das S, Sarna A. Migration in South Asia: A review. *Population Council*. 2015;1.
 22. El-Mumin M. Gulf Declaration of Human Rights (GDHR) Protection against slavery: A double-edged sword. *Arab Law Quarterly*. 2020;34(3):241-266.
 23. Khattab N, Babar Z, Ewers M, Shaath M. Gender and mobility: Qatar's highly skilled female migrants in context. *Migration and Development*. 2020;9(3):369-389.
 24. Joseph J. The plight of female migrant domestic workers in the Gulf States. *Who Pays the Price*. 2010;225-40.
 25. Shrestha M. Push and pull: A study of international migration from Nepal. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*. 2017;7965.
 26. Khadka U. 'History of Female (im) mobility in Nepal,' Immigration Dept proposal is Just the least proof of a misogynist bungling bureaucracy. *Nepali Times*; 2001 Available:<https://nepalitimes.com/here-now/history-of-female-im-mobility-in-nepal>
 27. Shivakoti R, Henderson S, Withers M. The migration ban policy cycle: A comparative analysis of restrictions on the emigration of women domestic workers. *Comparative Migration Studies*. 2021;9:1-18.
 28. Kharel A. Female labor migration and the restructuring of migration discourse: A study of female workers from Chitwan, Nepal. *Kansas State University*; 2016.
 29. Pyakurel UP. Restrictive labour migration policy on Nepalese women and consequences. *Sociol Anthropol*. 2018;6:650-6.
 30. Paoletti S, Taylor-Nicholson E, Sijapati B, Farbenblum B. Migrant workers' access to justice at home: Nepal. *Migrant Workers' Access to Justice Series (Open Society Foundations)*. 2014;14-22.
 31. Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare (MFEPW). *National Labour Migration Policy for Sri Lanka*; 2008.
 32. Weeraratne B. Ban on female migrant workers: Skills-differentiated evidence from Sri Lanka (No. 2021/44). *WIDER Working Paper*; 2021.
 33. *Migrant Forum in Asia*. (n.d.). CEDAW and the female labour migrants of Bangladesh. Available:https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1111144/1930_1335433758_mfa-for-the-session-bangladesh-cedaw48.pdf
 34. Shrestha N, Mak J, Zimmerman C. Stigma and empowerment: A qualitative study on Nepalese women and labour migration. *International Organization for Migration*; 2020.
 35. Weeraratne B. Migration and gender outcomes: Analysis of selected policies in Sri Lanka. *Working paper*. Washington DC: Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration; 2018.

36. International Organization for Migration (IOM). Pakistan Migration Snapshot; 2018. Available: <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/Pakistan%20Migration%20Snapshot%20Final.pdf>
37. Khan T. Female labour migration from Pakistan: A situation analysis. ILO; 2020.
38. International Labour Organization. Gender and migration from Bangladesh: Mainstreaming migration into the national development plans from a gender perspective; 2020. Available: <https://www.ilo.org/media/447891/download>
39. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (n.d.). Emigration, E-migrate (emigrate.gov.in)

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the publisher and/or the editor(s). This publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.

© Copyright (2024): Author(s). The licensee is the journal publisher. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:

The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:

<https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/122577>