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PROVISIONING AND WOMEN'S AGENCY
AMONG LESS SKILLED EMIGRANT
WOMEN WORKERS FROM KERALA**

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This paper was written for a conference on 'Gender and Migration: Negotiating Questions around Structure and Agency' organised by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, in Kolkata on August 22 and 23, 2013. I have benefitted from discussions of the paper at the conference and at an open seminar at CDS on October 25, 2013. I would like to thank Leo Douw, V. Santhakumar and the reviewer of this paper for their suggestions. T.S. Ebina, Elsa Oommen and Julie John provided excellent research assistance.

ABSTRACT

Unlike Sri Lanka, the Philippines or Indonesia, the major structuring contexts of international migration from Kerala / India do not enable the mobility of less skilled women workers, yet it has been observed that they are a prominent presence in some Middle Eastern destinations. Legal provisions designed by the Indian state apparently to protect less skilled women raise the barriers to their movement. There are also cultural restrictions as overseas mobility removes women workers from the everyday regulatory scope of local / family patriarchy. Autonomous migration by less skilled women defies the gender norm in Kerala which mandates marital control over women's sexuality. These factors render the agency of emigrant women workers oppositional, at once defiant and compromised. Recent work suggests that women migrate as domestic workers when there is a compelling need by flouting state regulation through easily accessible parallel channels. But in a cultural milieu that is hostile to women's autonomous migration, it is important to ask how less skilled women overcome cultural barriers at home i.e., who goes and what negotiations underpin their movement? The women whose narratives I analyze here turned to overseas work to improve their lives; but they emphasize the failure of marriage to provide a livelihood as the condition that shaped their decision to migrate. This paper draws upon a selection of narratives from interviews with over 150 less skilled emigrant and returnee women workers from Trivandrum district to argue that the conditions that structure international migration from Kerala marginalises women, narrowing the material base from which aspiring migrants are drawn and rendering their agency suspect but emigrant women maneuver local and family patriarchy by foregrounding the failure of marital provisioning and create the space to go.

Keywords: International Migration, Gender, Domestic Workers, Caste and class, Less Skilled Women workers, Women's Agency, Sexuality, Stigma.

Introduction

Less skilled women workers mostly domestic workers are one of two segments of women workers (the other being nurses) that have gained visibility in an otherwise highly male dominated flow of overseas migrants from Kerala to the Middle East. Emigrant domestic workers had received little scholarly attention but were catapulted into the sub national consciousness in 2011 by the popular Malayalam film *Gaddama*, which focuses on their intense exploitation. The film, however, strips the protagonist of agency even before her journey begins by showing her as compelled to take up an overseas job by penury and widowhood. A second narrative suggests that emigration by less skilled women workers entails making money through sex work thus investing them with agency of an 'undesirable' kind. This narrative has had a subterranean life circulating mostly in the form of innuendos and whispers, thus lacking public visibility though by no means lacking public impact. These narratives of women's agency have contributed in no small measure to the fashioning of a restrictive public policy on the overseas migration of less skilled women workers. However, state policy is only a tangential concern in this paper, rather I seek to demonstrate that less skilled women workers' agency is structured in considerably more complex terms that these dominant narratives will allow for. By agency I refer to the ability of a person to manipulate her personal environment, i.e., to mobilize information and other resources and to use these as the basis of decision making and action (Dyson and Moore, 1983). I also wish to draw attention to the ways in which women frame

their own agency in a context where emphasizing it could attract the pejorative meaning associated with women's mobility and sexual freedoms. Thus, the focus is on women's construction of their own agency as much as it is on their assertion of it in the context of overseas migration.

The women whose narratives I analyze here turned to overseas work to improve their lives; but their mobility removed them from the everyday regulatory scope of the family and local community. Women's autonomous migration in defiance of the gender norm in Kerala, which mandates marital control over their sexuality, and the nature of their overseas employment – care work in the intimate domains of the homes of strangers – subjects them to stigma. Overseas employment also positions them as the acknowledged breadwinners of their families in a context where the female breadwinner is constituted as an exception. Women are *recognized* as breadwinners usually in the event of breakdown of marriage. But even when they were married, less skilled emigrant women underscored the failures of marriage to provide them with a livelihood as a condition for migration because as I attempt to show in the paper, it was associated with dereliction and hence provided a socially acceptable ground on which a claim to mobility could be made.

International migration of less skilled women workers 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 from Kerala) and the economic and legal context in the Middle East (which determine demand). The legal context in the Middle East defined by the Kafala system, which ties a worker's residence permit to her sponsor-employer, and the exclusion of women domestic workers from the labour law is highly skewed in favour of the sponsor-employers. It would render domestic work unattractive to foreign workers if not for the aspirations that fuel migration from developing countries. In practice, it brings huge pressure on foreign workers to tolerate even

severe violations of their rights for fear of losing their employment status in that country. The structuring contexts of international migration from Kerala / India especially the cultural context in Kerala render women's agency oppositional, at once defiant and compromised. In view of its restrictive political and cultural environment, India has been viewed as a 'non sending' country of domestic workers (see for instance Oishi, 2005). Recent work suggests, on the contrary, that domestic workers from Kerala are a prominent presence in several Middle Eastern destinations, where they are able to go by violating state regulation through easily accessible parallel channels (Pattadath and Moors, 2012: 154, 157, Kodoth and Varghese, 2013, for an account of the 1980s see Wiener 2007). Pattadath and Moors (2012: 165) imply that women go when there is a compelling need. But in a cultural milieu that is hostile to women's migration alone, it is important to ask how less skilled women overcome cultural barriers at home i.e., who goes and what negotiations underpin their movement? I argue that the conditions that structure international migration from Kerala marginalizes women, narrowing the material base from which aspiring migrants are drawn and rendering their agency suspect but emigrant women underscore the failure of marriage to provide them with a livelihood and thereby engender the space to migrate.¹

1 The paper draws upon the narratives of over 150 women workers from Trivandrum district currently working overseas or who had returned in 2008 or later. Interviews were conducted with women from across the three eco-cultural zones – the coast, the midlands and the eastern highlands – between February and November 2013. The snowballing sample technique was used and emigrant workers identified with the help of local community networks of the Government, the Catholic Church and non-governmental organisations. Names of respondents have been changed to protect their identity. The objective of the study was to understand the political economy of less skilled women's migration, but this paper analyses the responses of emigrant women to specific questions related to a) the conditions in which they decided to take up overseas employment including the decision making process and b) whether and why they are subject to stigma. Narratives were chosen to highlight the range of responses to a question rather than to reflect preponderance, unless otherwise stated.

The paper is in seven sections. In the following section, I situate the migration of less skilled women from Kerala to the Middle East in the context of women's migration from Asia. Section three deals with how international migration amplifies the anxieties around the notion of the female breadwinner. Section four examines the material contexts that shape less skilled women's migration. It lays the ground to ask who goes in section five where I analyze women's narratives and draw attention to their negotiations with family patriarchy. Section six probes the ways in which women migrants deal with the shame they are subject to because women's migration in categories such as domestic work is associated with sexual transgression. The conclusion draws attention to the marginalization voiced by less skilled women workers through the particular ways in which they frame their own agency which must be understood in terms of the regressive influence of state policy acting in accordance with a conservative cultural politics of gender.

II. Situating India as a Sending Country of Less Skilled Women Workers

According to an estimate, 2.1 million workers in the Middle East were employed as domestic workers in 2010, nearly double the 1.1 million in 1995 (ILO, 2013: 29). Within the Gulf region, domestic work accounts for 5.6 per cent of total employment, but this share was 12.8 % each in Bahrain (in 2009) and the United Arab Emirates (in 2008) and a considerable 21.9 % in Kuwait (in 2005). More than a third of domestic workers employed in the Middle East are men. But owing to the low employment rates of women in the Middle East, nearly one third of all female workers in the region are domestic workers. Several scholars have noted that the employment of domestic workers which was restricted largely to the wealthy families in the Middle East before the oil boom has become a symbol of social status and is now resorted to widely. The bulk of the workers are sourced from Asia. 'The Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia are major sending countries of female migrant workers. The share of women among outward migrant workers from the region

has been rising over time, and is estimated to be between 60 and 80 per cent in all three countries' (ILO, 2013: 29). Indeed these countries are known for policies that have promoted women's migration intensely since the 1980s (Oishi, 2005). Though the Philippines is among the major sources of women domestic workers, only about half of the Filipino women migrants are in this category as against over 85 % of Sri Lankan women workers. (see Table 1) The proportion of household workers is not given separately for Indonesia but the majority of female workers are of this category. It has been observed that the Philippines is engineering a shift to increased exports of more skilled women workers (Chammartin, 2004, Sabban, 2004). The proportion of women among Sri Lankan migrants peaked at 75 % in 1997 but has declined thereafter owing to a deliberate policy by the government to promote male migration. Most recently male migration has been promoted intensely to South Korea by providing training for aspiring migrants to succeed in the examination that is a pre-requisite to employment in South Korea (Conversation with a Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign employment official in February, 2013). However, Table 1 shows that the numbers of women migrating has continued to grow. Migration of women domestic workers from Africa & Nepal too is an important source to the Middle East and is a more recent but growing trend. The top two destinations for Ethiopian domestic workers in 2008/09 were Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Fernandez, 2010).

Indian women were among the first to take up employment as domestic workers in the countries of the Persian Gulf, going from Kerala since at least the 1960s (Sabban, 2004, Sabika al Najjar, 2004, Shah, 1991, Weiner, 2007, our fieldwork).² According to estimates from the

2 Indian workers in the semi skilled category were the biggest beneficiaries of job opportunities that opened up in Middle East in the early twentieth century when British oil companies established contracts in several GCC countries. Malayalees were particularly well placed to exploit these opportunities owing to the history of trade between the Arabian coast and Malabar and demographic changes in the 1930s that had spurred migration of Malayalee men to places like Madras and Bombay in search of jobs (Zachariah, 2006).

Table 1: Women's overseas migration from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, 1980s to 2000s

Country	Year	Total	Fem	Year	Total	Fem	Year	Total	Fem
Indonesia	1983	12018	48 %	1997	502739	66 %	2007	546000	78 %
The Philippines	1980	38628	18 %	2000	253030	70 % (38.2 %)	2010	340279	54.5% (51.1 %)
Sri Lanka	1986	5150	33 %	1997	159816	75. % (88.2 %)	2010	266445	49.1% (86 %)

Figures in parenthesis refer to the proportion of housemaids (Sri Lanka) / domestic help and related household workers among female workers. (The Philippines)

Table compiled from: Chammartin, 2004, POEA Statistics; Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2010; Indonesia Department of Labour, unpublished data; 1998:14; in www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indonesias-labor-looks-abroad, Irianto and Truong, 2014.

Table 2: Estimates of the scale of migrant domestic workers in the GCC by gender and scale of Indian domestic workers

Country	Year	Total in GCC		Indian DWs		
		DWs	Women DWs	DWs	Women DWs	
Kuwait	2012	600000		Largest sending country after Sri Lanka		
	2010	569536	310402			
	2001				113000	49000
	1996		148000			40000
KSA	2013			5,00,000	50,000	
	2009	777254	506950	Relatively small proportion but numbers may be large		
Oman	2001				About 10,000	
	2012	224006	203845		93768 (India + Indonesia)*	
	2010				About 30,000	
	2009	94592	69256	Relatively large proportion		
Bahrain	2011	83198	51811	Among the sources		
	2001				8000 to 10000	
Qatar	2009	80342	48147	Among the sources of DWs		
	1997 - 2001	126350		55818	20307	

Table compiled from: HRW, 2012; Esim and Smith, 2011; Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012; MOIA, 2001; Deffner and Pfaffenbach, 2011; Sabban, 2004; Godfrey M et al., 2004; Esim and Smith eds., 2004; Shah and Menon, 1997, AL Mukrashi, 2013, Khaleej Times, 2014

* Indonesia and India are the two largest source countries.

destination, including those of the Indian embassies, India continues to be among the largest sending countries of domestic workers to Kuwait and an important supplier of domestic workers to Oman, Qatar and UAE. Literature on Asian domestic workers in Oman and Qatar is sparse but scholars based in Kuwait and the UAE consistently mention India as a major sending country. In our fieldwork too in both Kerala and AP, Kuwait was the most prominent destination of emigrant domestic workers.

Migration of less skilled women workers from India is poorly documented at the source. The tendency in the social science literature on overseas migration from Kerala to naturalize the male breadwinner norm, viewing women's migration mostly as part of families rather than as workers has only exacerbated this. Demographers, Zachariah and Rajan (2012, 180) note that between 1998 and 2008, 'normally' the proportion of women among emigrants should have increased 'as recent emigrations included more and more well educated workers who could afford taking their *families* with them' and conclude that the decline in the proportion of women migrants could be on account of 'the large increase in the emigration of *workers* [and not their families] to the Gulf in recent years' (emphasis added). Anthropologists too have focused on male migration but have demonstrated its influence in re-configuring gender identities, by privileging the flaunting of wealth by men, the payment of large dowries and bringing in new curbs on the mobility and interactions of women especially young wives of Gulf migrants (see Osella and Osella 2000, Kurien 2002). Since 2000, a specialized literature based on fieldwork at the source and destinations has drawn attention to the significant social and economic mobility achieved by nurses and the renewed stigma they are subject to on account of physical mobility (George 2000, Percot 2006). The limited work on emigrant domestic workers belies the impression that they are a negligible number and focuses on their responses to state regulation and their perspectives on overseas employment (Pattadath and Moors 2012, Kodoth and Varghese 2011).

The impression that less skilled women's migration is negligible is mainly from two sources of data – the statistics on Emigration Granted to women with Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports by the POE offices and the sample surveys on migration from Kerala and return migration. There are problems with both these sources. The ECR statistics is only broadly indicative. The ECR category is applicable only to women who have not completed secondary (class X) education. As the education levels have risen in Kerala, it is likely that a section of women with secondary or even higher secondary education will take up less skilled jobs with relatively higher returns than in India.³ Women emigrants who have spent a minimum of three years working overseas are granted Emigration Check Not Required (ECNR) status on their passports and thus they would no longer appear in the Protector of Emigrants (POE) data base.⁴ Further, women emigrants not infrequently bypass emigration clearance by resorting to 'pushing' – where the concerned official at the airport is paid off by the agent to allow the woman to go through without the emigration stamp - because they did not have the required documentation for it for one reason or the other.

Surveys undertaken at the state level or drawing upon samples from regions with high intensity of migration underestimate the scale of movement of less skilled women workers because the latter are geographically more clustered than migrants as a whole and because the high intensity migration areas identified in smaller scale surveys do

3 A survey of domestic workers in Kuwait conducted in 2001 found that 14 out of 43 Indian women workers had education up to high school or above (Godfrey et al 2004). There are some instances of women with diploma in nursing taking up these jobs when they are unable to secure remunerative jobs in the profession they are trained for.

4 Passports of women in this category had ECNR stamped on it. Where their passports were renewed in the destination too, they had the ECNR stamp. This point was also made by a senior government official of the MOIA.

not necessarily correspond to the sending regions of less skilled women workers. For instance, we learnt during fieldwork that there are significant clusters of less skilled women emigrants on the coast, remote interior areas and urban slums of Trivandrum district. Nair (1999) found that one out of six return emigrants in a survey of Trivandrum were women and that most of them were engaged in 'menial' tasks.

According to large scale surveys conducted in Kerala the proportion of female overseas migrants grew from 9.2 % to 14.6 % between 1998 and 2008, but touched 17 % in 2003 (Zachariah and Rajan, 2009). Only about half the women migrate as workers and women migrants are more clustered than men among those with the least education and with the highest levels of education. It seems more likely that the women who move as dependents have a better educational profile than the least educated women, who are more likely to move as workers. This is because of the income ceiling that would prevent workers with less income such as construction or agricultural labourers but even workers in skilled categories such as plumbers, electricians or drivers from bringing their families to the Middle Eastern countries and the likelihood that the men who are able to take their families with them, being better educated also have better educated wives. According to the 2008 survey, women emigrants were concentrated in four southern districts – Idukki (35 %), Kottayam (33.5 %), Ernakulam (25.4 %) and Pathanamthitta (25.2 %) - and Palghat in the north. The Central Travancore region comprising Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and Idukki districts correspond to the major sending regions of skilled women migrants, in particular nurses but also other professionals going to the industrialized countries and to the Middle East. During the fieldwork the returnee and emigrant women we spoke to in Malappuram district were of the impression that the emigrant women workers they met in the Middle East were mostly from Trivandrum and Kollam districts followed by Kozhikode and Wayanad districts.

III. Anxieties around the Female Breadwinner in Kerala and International Migration

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, July 27, 2013).

The norm of the male breadwinner 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 conjugal patriarchy, 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 caste hierarchies, to individual men within modern conjugal institutions (Kodoth 2008). Previously, marriage was neither considered mandatory for women nor confined to the monogamous form, matrilineal institutions being a case in point. Reforms centered marriage as the fountainhead of family and the core of social organisation and privileged specific forms of employment for women such as care sector work in education or health care, as extensions of domesticity, or organised sector work especially in the public sector because of the protected nature of this employment.⁵ Reforms also served to construct women's

5 Women in Kerala have had the highest share in organized sector employment in India, contributed by high shares in the care sectors – education and health - despite low overall work participation rates (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005: 3281-2). Even in 1957, it was estimated that one third of employees in the Secretariat of the newly formed Kerala state were women (Jeffrey, 2005: 133).

employment as secondary to conjugal domesticity.⁶ These gender constructions mobilized women into informed domesticity and served as the bedrock of development in the state. As Robin Jeffery (1992: 228) acknowledges, '[d]emocratic politics, involving large sections of a population can be made to provide services that people need and consequently use. Literate confident women will as *domestic managers* turn such services into better health for men and women alike' (emphasis added). The trade-off between efficient domesticity and paid employment is advanced as one of the reasons for the low work participation rates of women in Kerala despite the advances that women have made in education (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005). Full time wage labourers could ill afford such efficient discharge of domesticity. Not surprisingly, emigrant domestic workers are drawn mostly from social and economic groups on the fringes of social development.

Less skilled emigrant women workers comprise mainly domestic workers, cleaning staff in schools, hospitals and other private and public establishments, ayahs and helpers in schools, hotel waitresses, shop assistants and bar attendants. Until the early 1980s, the Indian state paid little regulatory attention to the migration to the Middle East (Nair 1998: 273). Since, however, it has resorted to various kinds of restrictions on the mobility of less skilled women workers including instituting a minimum age criterion, banning their movement to specific countries

6 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). In the 1920s, when the Travancore government restricted nursing to married women, a noted intellectual argued in the Legislative Assembly argued that women are appointed in hospitals precisely because they have a greater natural talent than men for nursing but that married women would be better qualified on that ground than unmarried women (cited in Devika, 2006: 50). In the early nineteenth century, Anna Chandy (2003: 114) had argued that those who favoured restrictions on married women feared that women's employment would destroy family happiness.

periodically and rendering the emigration process highly bureaucratic (Weiner, 2007, Kodoth and Varghese, 2011, Oishi, 2005: 80). Less skilled women workers usually possess ECR passports reserved for those who lack secondary level of education and are thereby subject to special protection / scrutiny. At present the government directs the POE to grant emigration clearance to women seeking overseas employment on ECR passports only if they are over 30 years of age and if they produce a direct employment contract endorsed by the Indian mission in the destination country on payment of a security deposit by the sponsor-employer.⁷

Popular and policy level representations stereotype less skilled women migrants either as abject - defenseless and lacking in agency - or as vested with illicit sexual agency and hence immoral. Government officials and policy makers defend restrictions on less skilled women.⁸ An official of the MOIA said lifting of restrictions would lead to 'unbridled movement' such that it would become impossible to control trafficking. On the other hand, he represents emigration for domestic work mostly as a form of voluntary migration for 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

7 This was affirmed by officials of the MOIA in interviews in Hyderabad in Feb 2013, and Trivandrum on January 16, 2014 and by the Economic Advisor, Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Government of India at the South Asian Regional Consultation on Safe Mobility of Women Migrant Workers held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 21-22 March, 2013.

8 Economic Advisor, Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Government of India explained that the Indian government's restrictions on the movement of women workers were to protect them (South Asian Regional Consultation on Safe Mobility of Women Migrant Workers held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 21-22 March, 2013, UN Women). 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. See also Kodoth and Varghese, 2011.

about them [usually a husband to provide for them] 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 was 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. That is why she returned. Now she wants to go back and those men were trying to help her. Another woman who was rescued came here and it was evident, she really looked in very bad shape... 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 family, as a condition that sets women adrift i.e., no longer constrained by norms, women learn to accommodate sexual services as part of their overseas work. Government officials also use reports of abuse and illicit sexual agency to argue that less skilled women are unfit for migration and that they denigrate the nation. The public sector overseas recruitment agency in Kerala refuses to place women domestic workers. According to a representative of the agency, recruiting women domestics 'is a risk, I am not prepared to do anything that will demean the name of organization'. He considers Indian women not suited to work as domestic workers as 'moral standards' and expectations of them are high (cited in Walton Roberts, 2012). A segment of private recruiting agents too shares in these stereotypes of women workers.

Notably, the Indian government has been unwilling to intervene in support of less skilled women workers in the destination. For instance, the Indian ambassador to the UAE refuted the need to raise minimum wages for domestic workers saying that it would increase illegal migration and characterised those with problems as mostly illegal and illiterate (PTI, 2008). But it acts on the suspicions of an undifferentiated public.

There has been a lot of abuse of housemaids. In a democratic society people in India do not like *to hear or read or see* that women go out and they are abused... we do not care if people lose jobs and do not go out, if even a small number come out and are abused. (Emphasis added, Indian Consulate official cited in Walton Roberts, 2012)

This perspective of women as symbols of national honour enables the state to curtail their rights as full citizens. The government has intervened strongly on behalf of migrants in general when Middle Eastern governments have threatened to send them back because of illegality or reforms in those countries (Wiener, 2007).⁹ It has also intervened when there have been reports of abuse of nurses and sought to protect their jobs rather than curtail their mobility (Kodoth and Varghese, 2011). Public sector recruiting agencies place nurses in overseas jobs and their economic contribution is getting growing recognition (Kodoth and

9 It was observed of the 1980s, the time when the Indian government began to curb women's mobility to the Middle East, that with the economic stakes running high the Indian government is 'willing to tolerate conditions for Indians in the Gulf that it would not tolerate for its citizens elsewhere' (Wiener, 2007: 143). The Hindu reported on October 20, 2013 that the Indian Embassy had mediated efforts by employers to recruit new workers in Saudi Arabia to avert the latter's return because of the recent drive towards nationalization of the work force by the Saudi Arabian government. A Malayalam daily, the Mathrubhumi, reported on November 7, 2013 that the state government in Kerala offered to assist returnee workers find employment in the Middle East, if they so wished.

Kuriakose, 2013). By implication, less skilled women migrants are marginalized in both cultural and economic terms.

IV. Material Contexts and Migration Resources

The experience of Sri Lanka suggests that the absence of a supportive policy framework could narrow the social base from which women workers are drawn. Before the government embarked on a policy of promoting women's migration in the 1980s, the typical migrant from Sri Lanka was 'an older married woman with limited education and a compelling need to support her family' (Oishi 2005, 160). The steep increase in the numbers of women migrants from Sri Lanka between 1980 and 2000 diversified their social profile and reduced the stigma they were subject to. Emigrant domestic workers from Kerala are drawn currently from a relatively thin geographical and social base. In Trivandrum, they are concentrated in localities marked by uncertain livelihoods – the coastal areas, urban slums, interior rural locations and highland villages. The density of women migrants is greatest in some of the densely populated coastal areas, from where they have been migrating since the 1960s. Elsewhere migration of women could be traced to the 1980s and 1990s. The social group composition of migrants is also distinct. Women emigrants are mostly from social groups that have been subject to caste-based discrimination historically and relegated to social and economic margins – Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), other backward classes (OBC) including Latin Catholics (converts of European missionaries from the coastal fishing communities), Muslims and lower caste Hindus. The ST women from the highlands started to migrate overseas only in the 1990s but their numbers were growing. Migrant women workers are rarely from the higher castes.

The people in the coastal areas are known to be outliers in terms of education as are the SC and ST groups. A few older emigrant women were illiterate but most had a few years of schooling. In the coastal

localities, a culture of migration shapes aspirations among younger women. Strong kin, social and commercial networks ensures a constant flow of information about migrant job opportunities and provides easy access to visas. Though women have less access to overseas jobs than men even in the coastal areas, in times of need it is a readily considered option.

Relatives and acquaintances, especially close kin, working overseas are often key figures in motivating aspiring women and persuading their families. They may also act as intermediaries, supplying visas for a fee. Women's narratives suggest that the assistance of commercial agents is inescapable, even when the visa is sourced through a relative because of the complicated emigration procedures. Returnee 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 laborers 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 section of respondents had worked in Israel, Singapore and Malaysia.

Reports of abuse circulate widely in the coastal localities but the fears of aspirants are tempered by the diversity of the experiences of migrants and their aspirations are honed on the gains that previous migrants have made. Agents have visas in hand or expect to receive them. They look for new clients and follow up on previous ones. Annie who returned in February 2013 said her agent, who is from Kochi, has

taken her passport to ensure that she does not accept an offer from another agent. She got her first job and visa in 1988 through a woman friend in Kuwait when she was only 21 years old. 'I paid the money to the agent here. She [her friend in Kuwait] took the money. She did not want me to know.' Annie is aware that her considerable experience, knowledge of cooking and ability to speak Arabic are a draw. Her husband is 20 years older than her and works irregularly at best. The agent is persuading her to go back. 'He says, 'Annie, you have to build a proper house', she said pointing to the coconut fronds that line the roof of her house.

He is asking me to go in December... I have done domestic work here... After seeing this child, I don't want to go [she is holding her first grandson]. But he [the agent] keeps calling. I don't have a house there is another girl [to be married]. My girl [elder daughter], that boy married her out of love, just like that without five paisa. We gave her a chain of one and a quarter sovereigns. But whenever it is must give her the 10 sovereigns of ornaments due to her.

Where women's migration is less established and information more scarce, agents may need to allay the fears of potential migrants arising from widespread reports of abuse of domestic workers in the Middle East. Shanti's agent was a man from her hometown who was working in Oman at the time. He offered her a job there and told her, '[i]t is not the way people here make it out to be. People say, it's like this, like that, they will kill you, chop off your head, cut off your hands. In reality, it is not like that. But us who stay there, we must stay there properly, with discipline...'. Shanti was able to count the number of women who had gone from her locality before she had – only four – in contrast to some of the coastal localities where every household had one or more women migrants. Migration was initiated in interior villages and highland localities by agents, who had gone to homes in search of potential

emigrants. Once initiated, social networks were developed and harnessed. 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. Rani, a Scheduled Tribe woman learnt about the possibility of going overseas from an acquaintance in 2010 and then contacted an agent. She had spent two years in Kuwait. According to her, agents were less interested in ST women as they were perceived to be less credit worthy.

Agents are notorious for cheating women migrants. Shanti's agent used his acquaintance with her to make her employer believe that he was her brother and siphoned off six month's salary before Shanti had learnt to communicate adequately in Arabic. 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. Many of the women had gone through the parallel channel referred to as 'pushing' (without emigration clearance) with the help of the agents often making a detour to Bombay.

In the coastal areas, women from the older generation were known to contribute significantly to the family income by vending fish 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 to finance their journey. Local moneylenders' are usually aware of the circumstances of the borrower and unlikely to support those they believe are a risk. Thus women may need to draw on their family's social capital. A women from a coastal village is unable to raise the Rs 2 lakhs needed to go to Israel. She said nobody would give her money because she had returned from Singapore before finishing her contract and her family was already deep in debt.

Women depend on their extended families to take care of their children and husband in their absence. Rarely do their husbands assume full responsibility for the care of their children. 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. Thangamma had refused offers to go to Dubai and Israel respectively after her tenure in Singapore, because she feared that her children would want for care. She is currently in debt and is making plans to go to Israel but said many well wishers including her employers at the local convent had cautioned her saying ‘the children you have brought up so well and your husband will go out of control (*kai vittu pokum*) but if all you want is to do is to make money then go’.

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).

As Carmel’s and Anila’s narratives show, even in areas that have a culture of women’s migration, aspiring domestic workers exercise oppositional agency in order to migrate because of the male breadwinner norm. 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). The dynamics of household decision making was altered in Sri Lanka through state interventions that strongly incentivized women's migration. In the absence of a supportive policy environment, family patriarchy may become the key arbiter of who goes. Our evidence suggests that who goes depends to a large extent upon how women are positioned 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 of our 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 provisioning, mostly unmarried daughters or siblings. This typology is not intended to produce exclusive categories but 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 signaled 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 rickshaw 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 upper caste overseas domestic workers in our 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 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 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 month 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': On their own initiative

It was rare for women to take up overseas work on their own initiative unrelated to marital provisioning. Most of our women respondents were married when they first migrated. In the 1980s and 1990s, our 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 the shores for foreign lands. 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 at the time 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.

State and social regulation restrict the movement of young unmarried women but there may be other reasons as well for why they rarely go. The younger generation of girls is relatively better educated

than their mothers' generation was and has better opportunities locally. Susanna, return migrant had said, 'Here 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 recently 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 but most had failed Class 10 or at the higher secondary level and were either housewives or waiting to be married. 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 West – 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.

Discussion: Failures of Provisioning and Women's Agency

Women's narratives provide a considerably more differentiated picture of the circumstances in which they take up overseas jobs than popular, policy or even academic narratives have allowed so far. In seeking to gain legitimacy for their migration plans, women make provisioning failures apparent. They move strategically to mobilize information, resources and allies, manipulate family patriarchy and gain support for their migration plans. Geetha is not unusual in manipulating her husband's consent. Women who fear refusal by their husbands' but are determined to go are known to withhold information until they complete at least some of the formalities. 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, he will create trouble, talk unnecessarily and drink heavily'. A woman whose husband suffered from suspicion that she was disloyal to him would not allow her to work even locally. She left from her brother's house informing her husband on the phone only just before going. The narratives also show that women define their aspirations clearly and articulate the rationales underlying their preference for overseas work. Full time workers for Malayalee or Arab families who received salaries that were not significantly higher than what they may earn in Kerala echoed Jumaila in pointing out 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 denial of emigrant women's agency is a refusal of women's own perspectives on their movement.

But, emigrant women framed their agency in more complex terms. Even women who were emphatic that they had made the decision to go i.e., that they did not come under pressure to go from their families, sought also to mitigate 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 for less skilled work is more tolerated than viewed as 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. 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.

Recognition of their agency does not undermine women's vulnerability to violations of rights including extreme forms of abuse or cheating. Majida narrates the heightened vulnerability of a young woman in a domestic workers job in the Middle East. She came close to giving up work. Though not within the ambit of this paper, I may mention that most of the women in our sample reported abuses ranging from extreme forms of physical violence and denial of food to inadequate rest and payment of a lower wage than they were promised. However, they present these violations not as dead ends but as part of everyday struggles to hold on to their employment; they negotiate and bargain with employers through explicit or subtle means as well as resist and even counter violence. It is important to recognize that the abuse of domestic workers in the Middle East is embedded in multiple structures – patriarchy, race, class. The legal frameworks in the Middle East and in India together and more importantly the Indian government's disregard for low paid women workers strengthen the possibility of structural violence against them in Middle Eastern homes. In this context, to suggest or even to imply as policy makers do that less skilled women are victims of their own making because they are ill equipped for work overseas, is to personalize the issue.

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. The life trajectories of women indicate the possibilities

migration opens up for the workers. For instance, 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 me as he would something most precious (*ponnupole* or like gold)’, thus marking her return to conjugal protection.

VI. Dealing with Shame

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

I have heard a lot [of gossip about overseas domestic workers]. About myself too I have heard... They ask, ‘you say you are going for work, what work it is, without asking itself we know.’ To put us down, [demean us] a kind of behaviour. But we know, that which is unacceptable to god, that kind of work we do not do.

Zareena, Highland Village

Women’s autonomous mobility to take up overseas employment opens up the possibility of immense freedom. In this context, domestic work in the intimate domains of homes beyond the national border heightens the suspicion of sexual transgression. In their home localities in Kerala, the jobs of less skilled women workers and the money they earn are coded sexually. So deeply entrenched is the picture of sexual

permissiveness of emigrant workers that women workers too share these perceptions. The typical response from them is that women emigrants are subject to stigma because of the immoral sexual conduct of some of the workers. As Susanna pointed out,

But among those who go, from what I have heard, there are good people, people who are pure of mind and body, but also those who are not. That we get to know, we know many things. But this applies to everybody. Those who go in bad ways and those who do not; this talk affects everybody.

Flaunting of wealth is considered a sure sign of sexual transgressions but moderate success or failure too may carry disbelief. Someone who has little to show for many years of overseas labour is castigated for living wantonly and continuing to neglect her family. Christina may be considered moderately successful. She spent 15 years in Oman, Qatar and Kuwait leaving her two children in the care of her mother and older sister. As the financial provider, she grew to be careful with her money because she believed that her sister was not using it well. This created tensions and eventually estranged her from them. A Latin Catholic from a coastal village, Christina says her relatives are unwilling to mediate in their family dispute because they fear that her family will accuse them of receiving money from her. She found also that the perception that migrant workers make money by any means could have serious material consequences when her family sought to implicate her in her daughter's divorce petition by alleging that she had an illicit relationship with her son-in-law.

Lateefa walked out of her marriage when her husband taunted her about having sex with her sponsor but women, especially from the Catholic backgrounds, live with taunts in a cultural environment that is hostile to divorcees. A woman who worked as an ayah in a school said her husband is the first to level allegations of sexual misconduct against her. He is fond of alcohol and rakes up debts for her to repay on her

annual vacations from Kuwait. Like many others from her community she persists in the marriage. It is not that women do not protest against the characterization of their work as sex work or as including sexual services to the employer routinely. In a discussion with returnee workers, Maria had said casually that to make money in the Middle East you need to use your body. She was comparing the relatively low returns to domestic work in the Middle East to Israel, where she had worked for two years before she was deported. Referring to this on a later occasion, Christina retorted, '[W]hat she said yesterday... I will never agree to that. Most of us go to live by our work not to do other work [sex work]. There may be people like that. But most people go in order to work for a living'.

But workers narratives position women as victims of sexual advances or as initiating them, in either case as lacking the personal integrity or strength of character to resist. Christina says:

When we give a small signal they [men] take advantage of that. We cannot blame them also. They leave their families and come and stay in an alien land. So if we keep our dignity, they will also keep their dignity... If we stand firm in the situation we are in, nobody can do anything to us. This is my opinion. Nobody can force us to destroy ourselves.

In contrast, Lateefa suggests that women are pursued relentlessly. 'When we go to live in a place, if we protect ourselves nothing will happen... If the two of you go [to the park], and you do not have anyone, he will mark you. You may be a good person. But hundreds of times he will call you, talking, talking, you will fall...'. Aware of the pitfalls of the situation they are in, women workers generally navigate the terrain of shame strategically. Working 'outside' a euphemism for working for employers on an 'informal' market that is strictly speaking illegal, may entail living outside in rented accommodation and is associated with greater scope for sexual transgression. Women who

worked outside sometimes denied doing so as we learnt from their co-workers. Women who spoke openly about engaging in part time work protested against these insinuations. For instance, Jumaila retorted that she lived with her brothers so why should people talk about her? They did not hesitate to point out that unlike full time workers for sponsor-employers they did not have to tolerate forceful confinement and abuse at the hands of their employers, which may include sexual services, because they could walk out of their jobs.

Full time employees of Arab sponsors pointed out that their lack of freedom was their protection explaining that confinement within the four walls of the house meant that they could not meet strangers. Only once in her long overseas career had Christina run away from her sponsor and worked for an Indian family. She observes, 'There are two things that the Arabis will not suffer: stealing and illicit sexual relations. If you keep away from these two things, you are safe in an Arab house. Of course there are Arab employers who abuse women but here also are there not such men?' Women who have run away from their sponsors are particularly circumspect, taking care to underline the significant breach of rights by the employers that led them to do so.

Women workers often find themselves in situations of dependence on Malayalee men. The lack of support for women workers from the Indian embassies in the destination countries (Kodoth and Varghese 2011) pushes them further in this direction. Emigrant women point out that Indian embassy officials supported the sponsor-employers in the event of conflicts. In contrast, individual men extend a helping hand. Referred to as '*annan*' (literally brother), men who may have 'enticed' them into sexual relationships and / or who 'rescued' them from difficult situations become their 'protectors'. These men may be agents, actual or fictive kin, boyfriends or even fictive husbands. Women are particularly equivocal about agents, who place them in jobs and may intervene when there are complaints but may also seek sexual favours

from women or cheat them of their salaries. A male protector is crucial when women are rendered illegal because they have run away, overstay their visas or when they work on 'free' visas. Having worked for a Kuwaiti sponsor for a brief while in grueling conditions, Jane presents abuse and sexual immorality as intertwined.

In these Kuwaiti houses, there are women who suffer a lot, a lot, too much. From there women run away, without their visa and all. They run away, go stop a taxi or something and get to some place... They really suffer, without food, without salary right into the night they are made to suffer. There are many like that, so they when they are helped out sometimes with the man who helps them they stay together. In that situation even if we blame them, later we will regret it... It is not an easy life.

Men and women may come together to set up mutually beneficial temporary domestic arrangements. Emigrant women refer to these as 'duplicate' families. These arrangements replicate the conventional division of labour with the woman providing domestic services in exchange for protection and financial support. Women on dependent visas say this arrangement brings them a bad name and creates difficulties in renting accommodation. Interestingly, Lateefa objected to this arrangement because it could lead to failure of marital provisioning. When her roommate in Sharjah condoned a particular instance saying: 'but Lateefa she is with only one person' suggesting that sexual relations outside marriage was at least not promiscuous, Lateefa said: 'I told her that that one person's family will be waiting at home for his income to reach. If I take it away, the family will not get it...'

In an environment clouded with suspicion, women may pay a high price to escape condemnation. Kochumaria gave up a job as a security guard in a college in Dubai, which fetched her roughly Rs 36,000 a month, because her Filipino roommates used to bring their boyfriends home. 'If there was a raid, we would all be picked up. I was

afraid. I have not earned a bad name so far'. Ironically many of the boyfriends of the Filipino room mates were Malayalee men. The sexual freedoms enjoyed by Malayalee men overseas rarely come under negative scrutiny but women's narratives signal the gender politics that enables men to exercise sexual freedom, whereas women workers are nailed on the suspicion of being sexually permissive.

VII. Family Patriarchy, Women's Agency and Overseas Employment

The male dominated migration flows from Kerala stand in contrast to the experiences of countries in south-east Asia and Sri Lanka, raising questions of policy at the macro level and patriarchal dynamics at the household level. 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, following the male breadwinner norm. Such work has served to mask the power relations that underpin migration flows. Policy barriers strengthen cultural stereotypes of less skilled women migrants, reduce the scope for them to seek overseas employment legally and narrow their social profile. In this context, family patriarchy becomes the key arbiter in deciding whether and in what circumstances women may go overseas.

This paper draws attention to how aspiring women 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 an entrenched norm of the male breadwinner and 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 domestic workers create the space to go by grounding their claims to

mobility and overseas work on socially acceptable terms – the failure of marital protection - thereby strategically muting their agency. Through their representations of their husbands’ abilities or the failures of marital provisioning, they may even attempt to expand the socially acceptable grounds for mobility to accommodate their claims. However, emigrant 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. In this context, emigrant women’s responses to cultural barriers against mobility and to sexual slander correspond to a form of ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti 1988).

The marginalization of less skilled women migrant workers is most apparent in a migration obsessed state like Kerala in their invisibility in routine policy considerations regarding work and remittances – which usually consider the implications of changes in overseas market conditions for migrant workers or the need to endow potential migrants with appropriate skills - as against their high visibility in policy narratives as victims of abuse and / or as agents of shame. The cultural politics surrounding policy making in India frames the abuse of women workers and / or their sexual exploits as sufficient grounds for curtailing their rights to take up overseas employment. Even as policy barriers strengthen the stigma against women migrants, the Indian government’s failure to provide support heightens women’s vulnerability and makes them dependent on individual men.

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