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Banning women from working in the Gulf will lead to more trafficking, say activists

The government is considering preventing all women from travelling to the Gulf to work in blue collar jobs.

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Activists have reacted with disapproval to external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj's comment about her ministry's decision to restrict women from travelling to Gulf countries except via government agencies.

The government had decided in November 2014 to process all women's applications for blue collar jobs overseas only via government employment agencies. The restrictions, she said, were to prevent women from getting duped. More than 7,000 complaints of exploitation came from men and women working in the Gulf in 2015, Swaraj had noted in Parliament in December.

A year on, however, activists continue to view the move with distrust.

“We sent 10,000 women to the Gulf [from Kerala] in 2014,” said Rafeek Ravuther, a migrant rights activist from Kerala. “This year, we sent only 837. It is a good step to have government agencies and to avoid agents and mediators, but they have to make the process simpler.”

The proscription applies only to women working in blue collar jobs and not to the smaller, far more affluent group of white collar workers in the Gulf.

There are no clear figures on the number of migrants to Gulf countries, but rough estimates **indicate** that around eight million of an estimated 16 million migrant workers send remittances home from the Gulf.

In September, India took a strong stand against employing domestic workers in exploitative conditions. In their new rules, they said that women would be allowed to go to countries in the Gulf Cooperative Council only after employers filed a request form for a domestic worker from India and deposited 2,500 USD in their bank accounts as surety.

Two months later, Kuwait decided to **stop** issuing entry visas to women coming as domestic workers. The preferred destination now seems to be Malaysia.

What happened instead was that middle agents and traffickers stepped in. Instead of applying to travel to the countries like Kuwait and Oman where the rules were stricter, people instead applied for emigration checks via Dubai and the United Arab Emirates. Once the women reached there, they are trafficked across the border to their real destinations.

“The problem is that even though women are restricted and have [emigration checks], nobody is there to take their immigration requests,” Ravuther said. “And so the present system of pushing – where women are sent without papers – still continues at some airports.”

Complete ban on cards

There might be more to come. The External Affairs ministry has been conducting a series of consultations with activists and returned migrants from across the country on whether women should be prevented from travelling to the Gulf altogether. This, say activists, would not serve the purpose at all.

“People will still want to migrate so a ban will put the responsibility on people for breaking the law instead of the government for not protecting them,” said Sister Lisy Joseph of the Migrants Forum of India, who is based in Hyderabad. “With a ban, more women will be exploited and discriminated against. Whom are they consulting before taking these decisions? Have they ever met these migrants?”

A key reason that people will continue to migrate even through illegal means is because of overwhelming economic hardships they face in their homes that make them brave uncertainty and

harsh working conditions to work in the Gulf.

Most migrants, Joseph said, are Dalits.

“For them, this is their best opportunity,” she said. “They have experienced such difficulties in those countries, but still they want to go back. They say what is 100 days of work, with only Rs 150 per day[under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act]? Their children are waiting to be provided for.”

Ground support lacking

India has at various times experimented with restrictions on migrants to Gulf countries. In 2000, for instance, following what it considered to be particularly egregious instances of abuse, the National Democratic Alliance government restricted women from travelling to Kuwait as domestic workers for almost one year.

In 2007, in an attempt to curb sexual exploitation, the government restricted women below the age of 30 from travelling to Gulf countries as domestic workers. This too has not worked in practice as agents simply procure false documents for women as young as 23. This and mandatory emigration checks before visas are granted continue to apply to women even today.

“We cannot stop migration,” said Sister Josephine Valarmathi, an activist working in Tamil Nadu. “Every person has the right to go where they want to work. The process should be channelized, because if it is not, there will be a lot of illegal migration. Most people are disappointed by govt recruitment. It is not quick acting.”

The problem, activists say, is that the government is approaching the issue with schemes but does not have the capacity to follow up on them.

“In interior villages, there are no facilitation centres for women,” said Joseph. “Our position is that even the Non Resident Indian Department is at the Secretariat, which people cannot access. They need to have offices and centres in migration-prone areas.”

E-migration, another initiative of the government, has also begun to move the government system away from aspiring migrants.

“How far is it used among uneducated and illiterate,” asked Valarmathi. “Even when we talk to them, they don’t follow what we say. Who will teach them this system? These are my concerns. If the government is bringing a new system, they should also create awareness.”

Economic loss needed

Objections have come from other quarters as well. In November, KV Swamy, general manager of the Overseas Manpower Company Andhra Pradesh, a state recruitment agency of the Andhra Pradesh government, *told The Hindu* that the state would lose Rs 500 crore of remittances from migrant workers each month.

A ban, he added, would also mean a huge influx of workers returning to their homes, and the state which did not have the capacity to provide them with jobs in the first place would not be able to cope.

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