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'Slaves' of Gulf: Women lured with high-paying job offers, trapped by traffickers

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Broken homes and financial burdens are leading women, primarily from the south, to human traffickers posing as job/emigration agents. Many women have been 'sold' in the manual labour market, often working in inhuman conditions. (Representative Image/Shutterstock)

Molamma didn't think she would return home alive from Oman. Promised a well-paying beautician's job in the Gulf, she ended up working brutal 13-hour shifts, with no break for rest or food.

"This is my second life," she said, her eyes welling up with tears as she re-united with her family at Kochi international airport in October.

Thirty five-year-old Molamma was one of the few lucky women to escape those who run a ruthless human trafficking racket in the Sultanate of Oman. There are many unskilled and semi-skilled women like her, especially from south India, smuggled illegally overland from Dubai to Oman and Saudi Arabia and left with no avenues of escape.

The Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS), an organisation funded by the International Labour Organisation's South Asia Labour Migration Governance (SALM), has received more than 50 complaints from Indian women workers in distress from various Gulf countries in the last eight months, according to its director Rafeek Ravuther.

Dubai is the main hub of the racket, say social workers. The women are "bought" here from agents and taken overland to Oman or Saudi Arabia, mostly without mandatory papers. This, in turns, makes the women vulnerable to exploitation by their employees and in no position to seek official help.

Trafficking on the rise?

According to estimates at the ministry of external affairs, there are more than 500,000 Indian maids, both legal and illegal, working in the Gulf States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Oman.

Social workers say the trafficking of housemaids to the Gulf rose in numbers after India introduced stringent regulations in 2011, which increased the cost to employers.

The new guidelines, applying to all GCC countries, stated that only those who earn more than \$2,600 (equivalent Gulf currency) per month can hire housemaids. Also, the sponsor has to provide a bank guarantee of \$2,850 (equivalent Gulf currency) as security deposit to the Indian embassy. This deposit is to be used as compensation for unpaid dues, salary and legal obligations.

The monthly minimum salary too is fixed at \$280 (equivalent Gulf currency) in the revised guidelines for employers. In addition, the sponsor is required provide free food, accommodation, annual return airfare to India and a prepaid mobile phone with a SIM card.

The Indian government tightened the screws further with the introduction of the E-migrate website (<https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/>) in June this year. Emigration clearance and visas for maids have to be channelized through this site.

Unfortunately, instead of bringing about the desired results, it sent the whole process of hiring migrant workers underground. "The Indian government had increased the cost of hiring maids. So employers began to depend upon traffickers," said Sajad, an Indian social worker in Jeddah.

"Saudi Arabia signed a new deal with India in 2014 (after initially refusing to implement the 2011 Indian guidelines), which was aimed at improving the condition of housemaids. However, illegal immigration went up in just one year as employers and recruiting agencies found ways to work around the deal," he added.

How the racket works

Molamma's story began in January this year when she was contacted by Vineesh, who claimed to be a recruiting agent for the Gulf. She paid him Rs 50,000 as commission and flew to Dubai.

Three weeks after she landed in Dubai, Molamma's ordeal began – she was “bought” from her Dubai agent by the Omani beauty parlour owner and trafficked across the border without visa and work permit. “He promised me a monthly salary of Omani Riyal 150 (approximately Rs 25,000), which I never got. When I complained about the horrible working conditions, he demanded Rs 2 lakh to send me home,” she recalled.

Molamma finally found the nerve to secretly seek out Indian social workers who took up the case with the Indian embassy in Oman and the ministry of external affairs in India.

Muralidharan, a social worker in Dubai, explained the modus operandi of the racket – agents in Kerala send women to Dubai on a visit visa. “They would then sell them to clients in Oman or Saudi Arabia, who would transport them to their countries without work permits. Some escape by contacting neighbours and social workers. Others resign themselves to their fate or end their lives unable to bear the torture.”

An International Labour Association (ILO) study in 2015 identified the emigration route from Kerala to Gulf countries as one of the most frequented one for female domestic workers. “A majority of workers depend on agents to facilitate migration and pay them large sums of money as service charges. The need for money to meet the present day exigencies is the major push factor for women,” the report revealed.

Social workers are more pro-active than Indian embassies about helping trapped women. “If we get to know about housemaids in distress, we alert the embassy and bring the worker home,” said a social worker in Oman who chose to stay anonymous.

Indian embassies in all Gulf countries do run safe houses where migrant workers seeking escape are sheltered before being repatriated to India.

The hubs: Oman and Saudi Arabia

The human trafficking racket to Oman was highlighted in a report released this July by Human Rights Watch, the global non-governmental human rights organisation. They had interviewed 59 migrant labourers. “In some cases, workers described abuses that amounted to forced labour or trafficking – often across Oman's porous border with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Employers typically pay fees to recruitment agencies to secure domestic workers' services, and several workers said that their employers told them they had ‘bought’ them. Some employers demand that workers reimburse them for recruitment fees for their ‘release’,” said the report.

Apart from Oman, Saudi Arabia is another major human trafficking destination in the Gulf region. Saudi citizens buy women from traffickers in Dubai and employ them as maids.

Feeding off desperation

Thirty-five-year-old Subaida from Kozhikode left for Saudi Arabia in March this year, to work as a maid for 1,200 Saudi Riyals (approximately Rs 22,000) a month. Her family, her mother and two daughters had rejoiced when she got her visa. This, they hoped, would be the end of their financial distress.

Soon, Subaida started complaining about physical and mental torture at the hands of her Saudi employer – she told her family she is made to work 18 hours a day without food or water, not allowed breaks and not given her salary on time. “She calls us once a month and weeps inconsolably. I think the torture had taken a toll on her health. I request the government to bring her alive,” said her 18-year-old elder daughter Shameena.

Subaida was abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant with her second daughter, Shana. She took to doing menial jobs to fend for her family, often travelling long distances in search of work. It was around this time that Rafeek, a man who introduced himself as a Gulf agent, offered her a maid's job in Saudi Arabia. Subaida didn't think twice before accepting.

Rafeek helped her complete the medical and visa formalities and even accompanied her to Mumbai, from where she flew to Dubai. Subaida didn't have to shell out even a single paisa for visa or travel: it was all sponsored by the agent and his bosses.

A Saudi Arabian citizen 'bought' her from an agent in Dubai, and took her to his house in the south-western city of Abha.

Rafeek confessed to this correspondent that the deal made him richer by Rs 20,000. "I got her the job, I think she is working there now," he said. "I am not aware of her difficulties in Saudi. It is not my duty to check her well-being. I have plenty of things to do in life."

Migrant activist Ravuther pointed out that the agent's nonchalance revealed the size of the human trafficking racket in Kerala. "If a local agent like Rafeek made Rs 20,000 in a single deal, imagine how much money his boss would have made," says Ravuther, who also directs 'Pravasalokam', a popular television programme on Kairali channel that delves into issues concerning migrant labour.

Follow the money

Though this trafficking racket is spread across India, it is concentrated mostly in the south – in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Agents prey on women who are in distress and offer them lucrative jobs. Some ask for huge commissions – between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1.5 lakh – while others do the deal for free. Muralidharan said agents charge a fee only if their clients are desperate. "They don't seek money from someone who is not sure about working in the Gulf."

The only way out, he said, is for the Indian government to step in. "The Indian government should take it up as a diplomatic issue. It should notify UAE, Oman and Saudi Arabia governments about these incidents if it wanted to curb the menace."

Another emerging aspect of this trafficking is how sometimes recruiting agents in Kerala are able to influence political and religious leaders into cajoling women to migrate to the Gulf for work. Mini, a resident of Wayanad district, landed a housemaid's job in Saudi Arabia after a priest from a local church asked her to meet Kunjettan, a recruiting agent.

"There were 40 members in the house where I worked. I had to wash clothes and clean rooms. I worked for 13 long hours. This affected my health – I had swelling in my legs and I was often nauseous. If I rest my employer's wife beat me. My husband Raveendran gave my agents Rs 1.5 lakh for my release and he had to sell our house to raise the money. Now we are in a huge debt trap and we have to vacate our house next month," said Mini, who managed to get home a little over a month ago.

Still missing

Many trafficked women are unable to contact their families because they are not allowed the use of mobile phones.

Thirty-five-year-old Hairunnisa has been waiting a call from her sister, Suhrabi, 40, who left for Ajman, an emirate in the UAE, three months ago. Two weeks ago Suhrabi did call her: "She said she was lured into a housemaid's job by one Aziz and Jyothi. She was first taken to the Ajman office of a recruiting agency frequented by Arabs looking to buy slaves. She told me that she was taken to Buraimi in Oman, along with 20 other women. After that I didn't get any calls from her. I tried to contact her, but in vain. I request the Indian government and embassy officials to find her immediately."

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