

International Women's Day 2017: Trafficked and duped, these women have nowhere to turn

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Editor's note: In the run up to International Women's Day on 8 March, we profile little known women in South India who have fought against all odds in their local communities to bring forth change and transformation. While some of these women stand out as shining examples of the power of determination, there are others who must battle misogyny and harassment. With this series, we highlight not just the trials and tribulations faced by women in all walks of life, but also how individual women are triumphing against caste, patriarchy and discrimination. Part II looks at women who were trafficked to the Gulf to work as maids.

Inakoti Venkatalakshmi. Age: 43. Trafficked, duped — and deserted. Venkatalakshmi, who hails from Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh, is living in fear of agents who trafficked her to Bahrain. "I am at home in my village. But I am afraid of them. They are powerful people. They can endanger my life and take away my daughters," she told *Firspost*.

Venkatalakshmi has grit. Deserted by her husband a few years ago, she had to take financial responsibility for her family — daughters Vinakoti Dally, 21, and Vinakoti Hebsiba, 12, and her mother V Laxmi, 72.

There were no jobs available in her village and no way to make ends meet. It was in December 2016 that she got a 'lucrative' offer to migrate to Bahrain as a housemaid from an

agent in her own village. Additionally, the agent also offered housemaid jobs for her daughters with ‘decent’ pay and stay in the agent’s house itself.

“What else is needed? It all sounded good. They agreed to pay my elder daughter Rs 5,000 and the younger one Rs 3,000. The salary offered to me in Bahrain was also good. Moreover, I felt that when I leave for Bahrain, my daughters would be safe in the agent’s house rather than staying with my aged mother,” said Venkatalakshmi.



“But everything changed when I landed in Bahrain. The salary and working conditions were not the same as what I was told in India. The working conditions were quite tough. I had to work continuously for at least 18 hours. I felt I would die. Meanwhile, they were forcing me to go to a hospital. I felt something was fishy. So, one day, when I got a chance I ran away,” Venkatalakshmi said.

With the help of Indian social workers in Bahrain, she took shelter in the Indian embassy there and returned empty-handed on 18 February. As she broke the job contract and had reportedly incurred “losses” for the agent, she was not allowed to meet her elder daughter.

“The agent in India kept my elder daughter in captivity. She was threatening that she will send my daughter to Bahrain to complete my job contract. I lost all hope. I was scared. That’s when somebody told me about Sister Lissy Joseph. Through her and with the help of police and a good advocate, I rescued my daughter,” Venkatalakshmi said.

Venkatalakshmi’s younger daughter had left the agent’s home in December 2016 as she couldn’t cope with the hostile working conditions, after earning just two months of wages.

“As we took police help to rescue my daughter, I am afraid that they will put us in danger. We don’t know where to hide. I don’t know any other places where we could go,” Venkatalakshmi added.

Exploiting Poverty

Advocate Nalli Ravishankar, who helped Venkatalakshmi to rescue her daughter with the help of police, said that he comes across such cases frequently. “Agents are exploiting poor women and men. We have to be more vigilant,” the advocate said.

Lissy Joseph from National Domestic Workers’ Movement in Hyderabad agrees with Ravishankar. “On average, hundreds of women who struggle to find a livelihood, are duped by agents and trafficked to Gulf countries annually, skipping all official recruitment channel procedures,” Joseph said.

“Kakinada was known for agriculture in Andhra Pradesh. However, none of the women or men from the lower strata of society like Venkatalakshmi own any land. They all are bonded labourers. When the economy changed, land owners moved into industrial projects. Those who continue with farming also moved to use technology, leaving people like Venkatalakshmi jobless — pushing them to fall prey to traffickers,” Joseph added.

Since 2014, the Indian government has initiated a safe and official recruitment channel named eMigrate for those who want to migrate abroad for a job, especially to Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) 17 countries. United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Malaysia, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria, Lebanon, Thailand and Iraq (emigration banned currently) are the 17 ECR countries.

The system was launched to ensure safe migration. In addition to this, the Indian government also has inked bilateral agreements with the Gulf countries to ensure protection of women domestic workers and nurses who are more prone to exploitation.

eMigrate and bilateral agreements demand minimum salary, proper job contract and also a financial deposit from the employer to ensure salary for the worker. Officially, recruitment of women can be done only through six government registered recruitment offices in India. As the rules are quite tight when it is done with the Indian government's knowledge, foreign employers circumvent the official channels with the help of agents in their own country and India and traffick women.

Bending The Rules

Rafeek Ravuther, director at Centre for Indian Migrants Studies, said that women who are trafficked through unofficial channels at some point go missing too. "I handled 60 such cases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 2016. Some have been traced and have come back. But at least two dozen are missing," Rafeek said adding that women are trafficked to Dubai on a visit visa and then sold to other countries. "Rules are not that strict in UAE. So traffickers are using that route," he added.

Like Kavita, wife of Sajimon PJ, a trafficked domestic worker, who went missing in Saudi Arabia and finally returned on 28 February. "My wife Kavitha went on a visit visa to Dubai and then was trafficked to Saudi Arabia by agents in August 2016," Sajimon told *Firstpost*. "We were told that she will be doing cleaning jobs at a small home. But the fact is that she was forced to work as a housemaid at a home with 25 members," he said.

Sajimon had filed an official complaint and was trying his best to rescue his wife as he lost contact with her for the last few weeks. "Finally, she came back home yesterday. She returned empty handed. It is not at all a problem. At least she is back. That's enough for me," Sajimon added.

After missing cases came to light, MC Luther, Protector General of Emigrants in India, had tweeted openly on his official Twitter handle advising women not to travel on tourist visas. In 2016, only 520,960 Indians have migrated to ECR countries though eMigrate.

Unfortunately, the Indian government doesn't have separate numbers on how many of them are women. Meanwhile, the migrants' rights activists in Gulf countries quoting the locally available data differ on the number.

“The number from Indian government doesn't tally with what we know. Agents skip official channel and traffick women. Daily, we come across such cases,” an Indian activist in UAE said on condition of anonymity due to security reasons. “Recently also, we came across a woman who was trafficked to Oman from UAE,” the Indian activist added.

According to Josephine Valarmathi from National Domestic Workers Movement in Chennai, Gulf countries are doing only little to combat trafficking. “They are least bothered about our women or men being trafficked. They want cheap labour. And that without much hassles. So, they circumvent rules and get trafficked women. Interestingly, there will be an Indian hand also helping the perpetrators in Gulf countries in trafficking,” Valarmathi said.

Read parts [one](#), [three](#), [four](#), [five](#) and [six](#) of the series.

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