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## Missing in the Gulf: Trafficked Indian domestic workers flee abuse

**#HumanRights** (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/topics/humanrights>)

After being lured to work in Gulf countries, many Indian domestic workers disappear every year. Some have been found, others not



Achama Vargese was denied medical treatment by her Kuwaiti employer, despite having been diagnosed with diabetes (MEE/Rejimon Kuttappan)

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Rejimon Kuttappan (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/users/rejimon-kuttappan>)

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**KERALA, India** - "Once, I was sitting on a chair and having food. I didn't hear them calling me. They lost patience and the husband came running to me, hit me on my head with his hands and kicked me. I fell down," said Sindhu Prassanna, recalling her traumatic experience working as a maid for a Saudi family in Abha, the capital city of the southwestern province of Asir.

Prassana is now safe back home in India with the help of a local NGO and Indian authorities.

In Prassana's accounts of her ordeal, she said that she was regularly beaten and abused by the couple she worked for, even for the smallest things. She worked almost 19 hours a day - from 4am until 11pm - and was only allowed to eat stale food and leftovers.

"I worked for nearly six months and had to return empty-handed," she said.

Prassana was introduced to the unofficial agent who got her the job through her neighbour, in the hope of making some extra money in the Gulf.

"I was not aware of official recruitment channels. I trusted the agent," said Prassana, who lodged a complaint against him with local authorities.

She was first taken to Dubai and then transferred to Abha, where she was given a 90-day visa.



Sindhu Prassanna is back home in India after a harrowing experience working as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia (MEE/Rejimon Kuttappan)

"Whether it was an employment visa or not, I don't know," she said.

After her relatives filed a missing person's complaint, she returned home in March.

According to Rafeek Ravuther, director at the Centre for Indian Migration Studies (CIMS (<http://cimskerala.org/contact.php>)), an NGO that focuses on helping missing migrants, CIMS came across 86 missing cases in 2016.

"Out of the 86 cases, 13 are still missing in the Gulf countries. The rest, with the help of Indian officials and social workers, we were able to trace, rescue and bring them home," said Ravuther, who was involved in the rescue of Prassana.

"I filed official complaints with the Indian authorities and with their help, found the whereabouts of the trafficked women and brought them back with the assistance from the Indian embassy officials and social workers in the host country," he added.

### **'He used to slap me'**

Like Prassana, 47-year-old Susheelama Achari, travelled to Saudi Arabia in 2015 to work as a maid through an unofficial agent, hoping to earn some money to support her family.

**'I was sold by my original employer to many houses to work as a temporary housemaid. I worked in 11 houses'**

**- Susheelama Achari, Indian maid**





Susheelama Achari says that her Saudi employer slapped her, locked her in a dark room, and would allow her only 5 hours of sleep (MEE/Rejimon Kuttappan)

"It was my first job in the Gulf. I struggled a lot," Achari told MEE.

"I was sold by my original employer to many houses to work as a temporary housemaid. I worked in 11 houses," she added.

Achari said that she was sometimes locked in a dark room with no light and allowed only five hours of sleep a day.

"For silly reasons, my employer used to slap me," she said.

After working without pay for more than a year, Achari returned to India in March with the help of Saudi police that were working in cooperation with Indian embassy officials.

"I still have to get nine months of salary. But I am not worried over it. At least I am back and safe," she said. "I had to undergo a lot of physical and mental abuse."

According to Josephine Valarmathi from the National Domestic Workers Movement (<http://ndwm.org/>) in India, an NGO focusing on the welfare of Indian domestic workers, "The average monthly minimum salary has been fixed at \$280. However, this varies from one country to another."

**'It was my first job in the Gulf. I struggled a lot'**

**- Susheelama Achari, Indian maid**

**'I had to flee from there'**

Achama Varghese, 45, another Indian woman who migrated to Kuwait from Kerala in September 2015, was denied medical treatment by her employer while working as a home nurse.

"I had some debts to be cleared. I was working as a home nurse in a nearby town," she said. "So, when I got an offer from an agent, I trusted him and migrated [to Kuwait] only to suffer."

After seven months on the job, she was diagnosed with diabetes. As her health deteriorated, her employer refused to take her to the hospital for treatment.

"I had to flee from there and take shelter in the Indian embassy," Varghese added.

Varghese was hospitalised in Kuwait for months before she returned to India in March.

"[My husband] cannot work because his right hand is paralysed. He is suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. That's why I migrated," she said.

"Now, we both are sick and struggling without any income," she added.

### **'I am clueless on what to do'**

But not all woman have made it home safely. Sindhu Saraswathy is one of scores of Indian domestic workers who have disappeared after taking jobs in Gulf countries.

In October 2016, Sarawathy went to Saudi Arabia to work as a maid to help her family.

'I still have to get nine months of salary. But I am not worried over it. At least I am back and safe'

- *Susheelama Achari, Indian maid*



Saraswathy Krishnankutty's daughter, Sindu, is missing in Saudi Arabia (MEE/Rejimon Kuttappan)

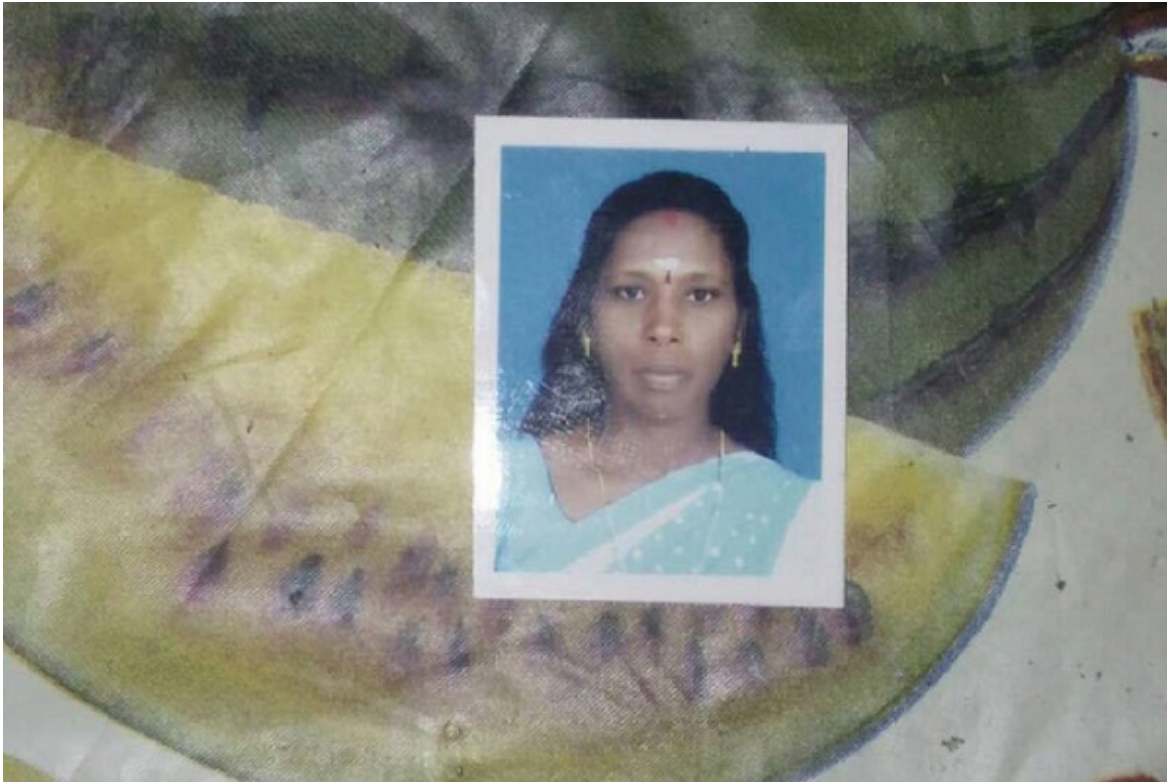
She made her last call home on 22 January. Her 70-year-old mother Saraswathy Krishnankutty is struggling to file a missing person's complaint with local authorities because she does not have the necessary documents to do so.

All she has is a passport photo of her daughter and an Indian ID card.

Sarawathy's daughter, 23-year-old Simi, said that her mother sounded unhappy the last time they spoke.

"At this age, I am doing domestic work in the neighbourhood to buy rice. I don't know the nitty-gritty of lodging official complaints," Krishnankutty said.

"I am clueless on what to do," she added.



A passport photo of Sindhu Saraswathy, all that her 70-year-old mother has to identify her daughter who has not called home from Saudi Arabia since 22 January 2017

## Government efforts

Valarmathi said that although the Indian government ([http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/9\\_Emigration\\_Abroad\\_for\\_Employment.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/9_Emigration_Abroad_for_Employment.pdf)) has set tight procedures for the recruitment of domestic workers, Indian women are still being deceived, abused and trafficked to the Gulf.

In 2015, the Indian government initiated an eMigrate system (<https://emigrate.gov.in/ext/about.action>), a safe and official recruitment channel for those who want to migrate abroad for a job; especially to 18 Arab and north African countries which have signed up to the Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) system.

In addition to this, the Indian government also has inked bilateral agreements (<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=113158>) with Gulf countries to ensure protection of women domestic workers and nurses who are more prone to exploitation, but Ravuthin said that these bilateral agreements



are not enough, adding that there should be more restrictions and guarantees to protect Indian immigrants.

Gulf countries have long been criticised for the treatment of domestics workers and the implementation of the *Kafala* system, a "sponsorship system" that ties the legal residency of workers to their employers. They also cannot quit their jobs except with the written consent of their employer. In March, an Ethiopian maid said that she was so desperate to escape her abusive employer in Kuwait that she jumped out of a window. The employer recorded a video of her that went viral instead of trying to help her. The employer was arrested by Kuwaiti police, according to media reports.

However, it is usually difficult for domestic workers to prove abuse and even when they can, employers rarely face criminal charges or get indicted by the courts, according to Human Rights Watch.

HRW interviewed (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/16/gulf-states-fail-protect-domestic-workers-serious-violence>) several women working in the Gulf, who said that their employers confiscated their passports, withheld their salaries, forced them to work without rest and no days off, and subjected them to psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. In some instances, the abuses amounted to forced labour or trafficking.

Some Gulf governments have made efforts to improve the situation of domestic workers, but not enough to guarantee their basic rights, according to rights groups. MEE requested comments from the Saudi and Kuwaiti embassies in India on the previous claims but they did not respond by the time of publication.

In 2013, Saudi Arabia issued regulations entitling domestic workers to at least nine hours of rest during every 24-hour period, with a weekly day off and paid vacation after two years, according to HRW. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/16/gulf-states-fail-protect-domestic-workers-serious-violence>)

But with domestic workers at the mercy of their employers behind the closed doors of private homes, these regulations are difficult to monitor and implement.

These rights are also much less than those stipulated for other workers under the labour laws, where they should work no more than eight hours a day, and are entitled to sick leave and overtime compensation, while domestic workers are not.

## **Trafficking gateway**

Ravuther said that the United Arab Emirates was used as an entry point for trafficking across the Gulf, as the entry is easy when compared to other Gulf countries.

"Women can be taken to the UAE easily on a tourist visa and then 'sold' to employers in other countries," Ravuther said.

In a bid to fight this, the Indian government has launched several campaigns to educate potential migrants, especially women domestic workers, on the need for safe migration. Several videos (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUSZSKrERPU>) and official tweets advised Indians to migrate only through official recruitment agencies and to get

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in touch with the Indian embassy once they arrive in the foreign country.

The local NGOs are calling for stricter penalties against illegal recruitment agents, and more government supervision on them. According to an Indian parliament document ([http://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/28233/QUESTION\\_NO2427\\_ACTION\\_AGAINST\\_ILLEGAL\\_AGENCIES\\_SENDING\\_INDIANS\\_ABROAD](http://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/28233/QUESTION_NO2427_ACTION_AGAINST_ILLEGAL_AGENCIES_SENDING_INDIANS_ABROAD)), 213 cases were registered against illegal recruiters, out of which prosecutions were brought in 42 cases in 2016.

In 2016, the number of Indian migrant workers who were given emigration clearance for recruitment in Gulf countries was 520,960 ([http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/lu935\\_11.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/lu935_11.pdf)).

But this is only a fraction of the total number of domestic workers in the region, most of whom are not working under officially.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) says that an estimated 2.4 million ([https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/gcc\\_legal\\_and\\_policy\\_brief\\_domestic\\_workers\\_final\\_text\\_clean\\_282\\_29.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/gcc_legal_and_policy_brief_domestic_workers_final_text_clean_282_29.pdf)) migrant domestic workers are “enslaved” in the six Gulf countries.

After their bad experiences with unofficial agents, the women MEE spoke to are now wary of taking a job offer in the Gulf through any agent.

“I have realised that it is quite risky,” Achari said. “I will look for job offers and recruitment only through government channels where I will be safe and protected.”





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