International Journal of Applied Social Science
(An International Double Blind Peer Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal of Social Science)
Volume 12 (11 & 12), November & December (2025) : 1001-1010
Received : 23.10.2025; Revised : 09.11.2025; Accepted : 23.11.2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE
ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)

DOI : https://doi-ds.org/doilink/01.2026-45266446/IJASS/12.11&12/1001-1010

Gendered Dimensions of UAE Migration Policy: Implications for Indian Women Migrants

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ABSTRACT

Migration from India to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represents one of the most significant South–South migration corridors globally. While economic analyses often frame this migration as mutually beneficial, such perspectives obscure the deeply gendered nature of migration governance and lived experiences. This article critically examines how UAE migration policies, labor regimes, and socio-cultural norms shape the trajectories of Indian women migrants. Drawing on feminist migration theory, political economy, and a qualitative synthesis of policy documents and empirical literature, the study reveals that migration governance in the UAE operates as a gendered system of control rather than a neutral regulatory framework. Indian women migrants—particularly domestic workers, caregivers, and service-sector employees—face restricted mobility, limited legal protections, moral surveillance, and structural invisibility. At the same time, these women actively negotiate agency, sustain transnational households, and redefine gender roles within their families and communities of origin. The article argues that Indian women's migration is central to the reproduction of Gulf economies and transnational social systems, yet remains marginalised in policy discourse. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, the study calls for a shift toward gender-responsive migration governance rooted in human rights, dignity, and social justice across both sending and receiving states.

Keywords: Gendered migration, Indian women migrants, UAE migration policy, Feminist political economy, Gulf labor regimes

INTRODUCTION

Migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states has long been narrated as a story of numbers: labor shortages filled, remittances transferred, GDPs boosted, and skylines erected at remarkable speed (Zachariah and Rajan, 2015). In this dominant script, migrants appear as economic inputs rather than social beings, moving seamlessly from one labor market to another like interchangeable units of productivity. Among the GCC states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) occupies a particularly prominent place in this narrative, often celebrated as a model of efficient temporary labor migration (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). Millions of foreign workers sustain its construction sites, shopping malls, hospitals, hotels, and households, ensuring that the promise of a "global city" is reproduced daily through invisible labor. Within this migration economy, Indians constitute the largest expatriate population in the UAE, forming the backbone of its workforce across skill levels (Zachariah and Rajan, 2015). Yet despite this numerical dominance, academic and policy-oriented scholarship has historically focused on a remarkably narrow segment of this population: men in construction helmets, factory uniforms, and transport services. These men have become the default migrant subject in Gulf migration studies—measurable, visible, and economically legible. Women migrants, by contrast, have remained at the margins of scholarly attention, appearing either as statistical footnotes or as occupants of a single, overburdened category: domestic workers (Fernandez, 2014). This selective visibility is not accidental. It reflects a broader epistemological bias within migration studies where male mobility is treated as normal, rational, and productive,

How to cite this Article: Ansari, Shahid Jamal and Alam, Shamsheer (2025). Gendered Dimensions of UAE Migration Policy: Implications for Indian Women Migrants . *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **12** (11 & 12) : 1001-1010.

while female mobility is framed as exceptional, risky, or morally fraught (Parreñas, 2015). When men migrate, it is called "labor mobility"; when women migrate, it is often described as a "social problem," a "protection concern," or a deviation from normative gender roles. As a result, Indian women migrants in the UAE tend to disappear analytically—except when something goes wrong. Abuse cases, rescue narratives, and policy bans suddenly bring them into view, only for them to vanish again once the crisis subsides. Ironically, this invisibility exists alongside profound economic dependence. Indian women migrants are indispensable to the UAE's care economy, service sector, and increasingly feminized labor markets. They clean homes, care for children and the elderly, staff hospitals and hotels, and sustain everyday life in ways that make high-income professional lifestyles possible. Yet their indispensability does not translate into security. Instead, Indian women migrants occupy a paradoxical position: economically essential but legally precarious, socially necessary but politically marginal, physically present yet institutionally absent. Their lives are governed by policies that assume they are temporary, replaceable, and best kept silent. What distinguishes women's migration in the UAE is not merely the type of work they perform but the dense web of gendered controls that accompany their mobility. Migration journeys are shaped not only by labor demand but by moral regulations, sponsorship regimes, and socio-cultural anxieties surrounding women's bodies, sexuality, and autonomy. The kafala system, often discussed as a labor governance mechanism, operates in practice as a form of intimate regulation—structuring where women can live, work, move, and sometimes even speak. For women migrants, legal status frequently extends beyond employment into the realm of personal conduct, turning everyday life into a continuous negotiation of visibility and compliance. The humour—if one may call it that—lies in the contradiction between policy language and lived reality. Official documents speak of "gender-neutral" labor reforms, while women continue to experience deeply gender-specific vulnerabilities. Domestic work is labeled "low-skilled," despite requiring emotional intelligence, endurance, and round-the-clock availability. Temporary migration is framed as voluntary and contractual, even as many women find that changing employers or exiting abusive situations is anything but simple. The system insists it is rational and efficient, while women navigate it through improvisation, resilience, and quiet acts of resistance. This article seeks to move beyond descriptive and crisis-driven accounts of Indian women's migration to the UAE by critically interrogating the gendered architecture of migration governance itself. Rather than asking only how many women migrate or in which sectors they work, it asks deeper questions: How do legal frameworks, sponsorship systems, and moral regimes intersect with gender to produce differentiated migrant experiences? Why does women's labor remain central to economic reproduction yet peripheral in policy imagination? And how do Indian women migrants navigate, negotiate, and sometimes subvert these structures in their everyday lives? By adopting a feminist and human-centred perspective, this study challenges the dominant tendency to treat women migrants either as victims in need of rescue or as invisible contributors to economic growth. Instead, it reframes Indian women migrants as social actors whose migration experiences illuminate the hidden workings of Gulf labor regimes. Their stories reveal that migration policy is not merely a technical system of regulation but a gendered form of governance—one that manages labor by managing lives. In doing so, this article argues that understanding migration in the UAE without centring women is not only incomplete, but analytically misleading. Furthermore, examining Indian women's migration to the UAE offers an opportunity to interrogate how "temporariness" itself functions as a gendered fiction. While migration policies insist on the short-term and reversible nature of foreign labor, many women spend years—sometimes decades—circulating between contracts, employers, and countries, accumulating not permanence but prolonged uncertainty. Temporariness, in this sense, becomes a durable condition rather than a transitional phase. For women migrants, this durability is experienced not only in employment but in emotional life: relationships are postponed, motherhood is reconfigured, and belonging is continuously deferred. There is also a certain policy irony in how women migrants are simultaneously over-regulated and under-protected. Their mobility is tightly monitored, their morality scrutinised, and their dependency institutionalised, yet when violations occur, responsibility is quietly displaced onto individual employers, recruitment agents, or the women themselves. Protection, it seems, becomes everyone's concern and no one's obligation. This contradiction exposes the limits of technocratic reform when gendered power relations remain unaddressed. By foregrounding these contradictions, the article situates Indian women migrants

not at the margins but at the analytical centre of Gulf migration studies. Their experiences illuminate how migration governance operates through everyday life, intimate spaces, and silent compromises. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for gender-sensitive scholarship but for any serious attempt to comprehend how contemporary labor migration regimes actually function—beyond policy texts, beyond economic indicators, and beyond the comforting illusion that neutrality is the same as fairness.

Feminist Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Migration:

Feminist scholarship has fundamentally reshaped migration studies by challenging the assumption that migration is a gender-neutral economic process. Feminist migration theory emphasises that migration is socially embedded, structured by power relations, and deeply gendered in its causes, experiences, and consequences. Scholars argue that women's migration must be understood within the broader context of global care chains, social reproduction, and neoliberal labor restructuring (Parreñas, 2015). From a feminist political economy perspective, women's labor—particularly care and domestic work—is systematically undervalued, in formalised, and excluded from labor protections (Acharya, 2018; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). In the Gulf context, this devaluation is institutionalised through migration policies that distinguish between "productive" and "reproductive" labor, privileging male-dominated sectors while marginalising feminized forms of work marginal (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). Intersectionality further deepens this analysis by highlighting how gender intersects with nationality, class, religion, and legal status. Indian women migrants experience multiple, overlapping forms of marginalisation: as women, as migrants, as racialised non-citizens, and often as workers in stigmatised occupations. These intersecting identities shape their vulnerability while also informing their strategies of resistance and survival. Feminist scholarship also unsettles the conventional temporal framing of migration, which often treats mobility as a linear sequence of departure, employment, and return (Parreñas, 2015). For women migrants, particularly in contexts such as the Gulf, migration is better understood as a cyclical and relational process shaped by care obligations, emotional ties, and social expectations that extend across borders. Feminist theorists argue that these relational dimensions are not peripheral but central to how migration is experienced and governed. Women's migration decisions are frequently embedded in family strategies, yet the labor regimes they enter individualise responsibility, rendering care obligations invisible while extracting maximum productivity. Another critical contribution of feminist theory lies in its attention to the body as a site of governance. Migration policies do not merely regulate labor markets; they regulate bodies—where they can move, how they can behave, and under what conditions they are deemed acceptable. In the Gulf context, women migrants' bodies are subjected to heightened scrutiny through moral policing, dress codes, and legal regulations surrounding sexuality and reproduction (Fernandez, 2014). Feminist perspectives reveal how such controls are not incidental but integral to migration governance, reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative norms while maintaining social hierarchies between citizens and non-citizens. Feminist migration theory further challenges the binary between agency and victimhood that dominates public and policy discourse. Indian women migrants are often portrayed either as empowered economic actors or as helpless victims of exploitation (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). Feminist scholars argue that this binary obscure the complex, everyday negotiations through which women navigate constrained choices. Agency, in this view, does not always take the form of overt resistance; it can also manifest as endurance, strategic silence, emotional labor, and the cultivation of informal networks. These forms of agency may appear mundane, yet they are central to migrants' survival and dignity within restrictive systems. Importantly, feminist approaches draw attention to the emotional dimensions of migration, an aspect largely absent from mainstream economic analyses. Feelings of guilt, longing, fear, and aspiration are not merely personal experiences but are shaped by structural conditions. For Indian women migrants, emotional labor extends beyond the workplace into transnational family life, where they are expected to remain caring daughters, wives, or mothers despite physical absence. Feminist theory situates these emotional burdens within the broader political economy of migration, showing how affective labor sustains transnational social reproduction while remaining uncompensated and unrecognised (Parreñas, 2015). Finally, feminist scholarship insists on reflexivity in knowledge production. It questions whose voices are amplified in migration research and whose experiences

are rendered marginal or anecdotal. By privileging policy texts, employer perspectives, or aggregate data, traditional migration studies often reproduce the very hierarchies they seek to analyse. Feminist perspectives advocate for methodologies that center migrants' narratives, everyday practices, and embodied experiences, not as illustrative add-ons but as sources of theoretical insight. In doing so, feminist migration theory transforms Indian women migrants from objects of study into epistemic agents whose lives challenge and refine existing frameworks of migration analysis. Feminist theoretical perspectives also compel a rethinking of power in migration beyond formal institutions to include everyday practices, silences, and normalised inequalities. Power, from this viewpoint, is not exercised solely through laws, contracts, or border controls, but through routine interactions in workplaces, households, and social spaces where hierarchies are reproduced and rarely questioned. For Indian women migrants in the UAE, power is often experienced in subtle forms: the expectation of gratitude for employment, the normalisation of excessive availability, and the moral framing of obedience as professionalism. Feminist theory illuminates how these expectations become internalised, shaping women's self-perceptions and strategies of survival. At the same time, it reveals how such power relations are continuously negotiated rather than passively endured. Small acts—such as redefining personal boundaries, cultivating solidarities, or selectively asserting rights—challenge the totalising image of domination. By foregrounding these micro-politics of everyday life, feminist migration theory exposes the gap between formal policy claims of neutrality and the lived realities of gendered governance (Acharya, 2018). This analytical lens is particularly crucial in the Gulf context, where the absence of political citizenship for migrants intensifies reliance on informal power structures, making gender a central axis through which authority, vulnerability, and agency are produced and sustained.

Overview of UAE Migration Governance:

The UAE migration regime is characterised by its temporary labor model, which explicitly rejects permanent settlement and citizenship for migrant workers (Zachariah and Rajan, 2015). Central to this system is the kafala (sponsorship) framework, which links a migrant's legal residence to their employer. While recent labor reforms have sought to modernise aspects of this system, its core logic remains intact. Gender neutrality in legal texts often conceals gendered outcomes (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). Male migrants are more likely to work in regulated sectors governed by labor laws, while women—particularly domestic workers—are excluded from key protections such as standardised working hours, collective bargaining, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms. Even where reforms exist, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in private households where domestic work takes place. The moral governance of migrants further complicates women's experiences. Regulations surrounding sexuality, pregnancy, and family life disproportionately affect women migrants, subjecting them to surveillance and legal vulnerability (Fernandez, 2014; ILO, 2021).

Thus, migration governance in the UAE extends beyond labor regulation into the intimate domains of women's lives. Beyond its formal designation as a labor management system, UAE migration governance operates as a broader regime of social ordering that regulates not only employment but also dependency, mobility, and legitimacy. The temporary labor model institutionalises uncertainty by design, producing a workforce that is perpetually present yet structurally transient, with limited capacity to claim rights or continuity. Within this framework, the kafala system functions less as an administrative mechanism and more as a technology of control that privatises state authority by delegating regulatory power to employers. This delegation has gendered consequences, as women migrants—especially those employed in domestic and care work—are absorbed into spaces that remain largely inaccessible to public oversight. The household, framed as a private domain, becomes a regulatory vacuum where labor laws thin out and employer discretion expands. Governance thus shifts from codified regulation to personalised authority, making protection contingent rather than guaranteed. At the same time, migration control is reinforced through moral regimes that conflate legal compliance with personal conduct, effectively binding women's labor rights to their conformity to gendered social norms. Practices such as restrictions on family reunification, scrutiny of reproductive status, and the criminalisation of certain intimate relationships embed moral judgment into migration management. These mechanisms produce a differentiated hierarchy of migrant legitimacy, where women's legal security is more fragile and more conditional than that of men. Importantly, the governance system relies not on constant enforcement

but on the normalisation of risk, encouraging self-regulation, silence, and compliance among migrants aware of their replaceability. In this sense, UAE migration governance is not simply about managing foreign labor flows; it is about sustaining an orderly, disciplined, and gendered migrant population whose economic contribution is maximised while political and social claims are systematically minimised. UAE migration governance also operates through selective inclusion, where access to rights, mobility, and security is unevenly distributed across migrant categories in ways that appear administrative but function as deeply political distinctions. Visa classifications, contract types, and sponsorship hierarchies construct gradients of belonging that shape migrants' everyday realities, with women frequently positioned closer to the most restrictive end of this spectrum. For Indian women migrants, legal status is often tethered not only to employment but to assumptions about dependency and moral risk, resulting in heightened vulnerability to abrupt termination, deport-ability, and legal liminality. Governance is further complicated by the spatial organisation of migrant life, as women employed in private households or feminized service sectors remain physically dispersed and socially isolated, limiting their access to collective action or institutional recourse. This fragmentation is not incidental; it reduces the visibility of rights violations while reinforcing individualised responsibility for survival. Moreover, policy reforms that claim to enhance flexibility—such as limited contract mobility or dispute mechanisms—often presuppose levels of legal literacy, language proficiency, and institutional trust that many women migrants do not possess. As a result, formal rights exist alongside practical inaccessibility, creating what may be described as a governance gap between law and lived experience. Moral governance intensifies this gap by framing women migrants simultaneously as workers and as subjects of cultural regulation, where conformity to gendered expectations becomes an unspoken condition for legal stability. The cumulative effect is a migration regime that produces compliance through uncertainty rather than coercion, encouraging women to internalise risk as an ordinary feature of migrant life. In this system, governance is most effective precisely because it is diffuse, operating through fear of loss, silence, and replaceability rather than overt force, thereby sustaining a labor order that appears orderly while remaining structurally unequal.

Indian Women Migrants in the UAE: Patterns and Pathways

Indian women migrate to the UAE through diverse pathways shaped by class, education, region, and social networks (Acharya, 2018). While domestic work remains the most visible sector, women are also employed in healthcare, hospitality, retail, beauty services, and education. Migration motivations range from economic necessity and debt repayment to aspirations for autonomy, family responsibility, and social mobility. Recruitment processes often involve intermediaries who operate within weakly regulated transnational labor markets (Fernandez, 2014). Despite India's attempts to regulate women's migration through age restrictions and emigration clearance requirements, these measures have often pushed women toward irregular channels rather than enhancing protection. Once in the UAE, women's legal dependency on employers restricts job mobility and exit options. Passport confiscation, contract substitution, and wage delays remain persistent issues. Yet migration is not experienced uniformly. Middle-class women professionals encounter different challenges than domestic workers, highlighting intra-gender inequalities within migration. Beyond these broad patterns, Indian women's migration to the UAE is marked by significant internal differentiation that complicates any singular narrative of experience or vulnerability. Women's regional origins within India shape both migration pathways and labor outcomes, with migrants from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and increasingly northern states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh entering the UAE through distinct social networks and recruitment circuits. These networks often function as informal infrastructures of migration, providing information, referrals, and initial support, while simultaneously reproducing hierarchies of trust, obligation, and silence. Class and educational background further mediate access to sectors of employment, with professional women in healthcare, education, and corporate services benefiting from formal contracts and greater mobility, yet still encountering gendered barriers such as workplace discrimination, glass ceilings, and sexualised scrutiny. For domestic workers and low-wage service employees, dependence on recruiters and employers intensifies exposure to deception, contract substitution, and exploitative working conditions, particularly during the transition from arrival to placement. Migration decisions are frequently embedded in household strategies where women's earnings are positioned as

supplementary yet essential, generating expectations of sacrifice and endurance that travel with them across borders. This moral framing often constrains women's ability to exit abusive situations, as return is equated with personal failure rather than structural injustice. Pathways into irregularity further blur distinctions between legality and illegality, as overstaying visas, changing employers without authorisation, or escaping abusive households become survival strategies rather than deliberate acts of non-compliance. Once irregular, women face heightened risks of detention, deportation, and wage theft, while simultaneously losing access to even minimal forms of institutional protection. Importantly, migration pathways are not static; women move between sectors, legal statuses, and household arrangements over time, producing trajectories characterised by instability rather than linear progression. These transitions are shaped by life-course events such as marriage, childbirth, illness, or family crisis in India, underscoring the entanglement of migration with gendered responsibilities across borders. Despite these constraints, women actively cultivate coping strategies, including skill acquisition, language learning, and informal entrepreneurship, to navigate restrictive labor markets. Digital platforms play a growing role in reshaping pathways, enabling women to access information, maintain transnational ties, and occasionally bypass exploitative intermediaries. Yet these adaptive strategies do not eliminate structural inequalities; rather, they reveal the extent to which women's mobility is sustained through personal resilience in the absence of robust institutional support (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020).

Taken together, the patterns and pathways of Indian women's migration to the UAE illustrate a system that depends on flexibility from workers while offering them little security in return, reinforcing a gendered migration regime where risk is individualised and protection remains unevenly distributed. These pathways are further shaped by temporal uncertainty, as Indian women migrants often experience migration not as a bounded episode but as a prolonged condition of waiting—waiting for salary revisions, contract renewals, exit permits, or family reunification approvals that may never materialise. Time, in this context, becomes a form of governance, disciplining women through delayed decisions and suspended futures. Short-term contracts are repeatedly renewed, creating an illusion of choice while reinforcing dependence on employers and sponsors. Women adjust their aspirations accordingly, postponing personal goals and recalibrating expectations to align with the rhythms of migration bureaucracy. The cumulative effect is a gradual normalisation of precocity, where instability is not experienced as a crisis but as an ordinary feature of migrant life. This temporal dimension also reshapes return imaginaries; for many women, return is continuously deferred, not because migration has delivered security, but because uncertainty has become too costly to interrupt. Such dynamics underscore how migration pathways are not only spatial but temporal processes, structured by policies that extract labor while keeping futures perpetually open-ended. By foregrounding time as a gendered dimension of migration, this analysis reveals how Indian women migrants are required to remain flexible not only in their work but in their lives, absorbing uncertainty in ways that sustain both household economies in India and labor markets in the UAE.

Gendered Labor Segmentation and Workplace Experiences:

Labor segmentation in the UAE reflects deeply gendered assumptions about skill, productivity, and social value. Domestic and care work—predominantly performed by women—is constructed as unskilled despite requiring emotional intelligence, physical endurance, and cultural adaptability adaptability (Parreñas, 2015; ILO, 2021). This classification justifies low wages, long hours, and limited labor protections (Fernandez, 2014). Indian women domestic workers frequently report experiences of overwork, isolation, verbal abuse, and psychological distress. The private household as a workplace renders violations invisible and difficult to regulate. At the same time, women employed in service and professional sectors face subtler forms of discrimination, including wage disparities, limited promotion opportunities, and sexual harassment (Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). Despite these constraints, women develop coping mechanisms and forms of agency. These include informal support networks, religious communities, strategic compliance, and transnational communication practices that sustain emotional well-being (Acharya, 2018).

Gendered labor segmentation in the UAE operates through a quiet but remarkably efficient logic that decides, often in advance, what kinds of work are worthy of regulation, recognition, and rest, and what kinds are simply expected to be endured. Domestic and care work, overwhelmingly performed by women, is routinely labeled as "unskilled," a classification that would be puzzling if it

were not so familiar. One might reasonably ask how managing households, caring for children and elderly relatives, navigating linguistic and cultural differences, and remaining emotionally available for extended hours qualifies as a lack of skill, but such questions rarely trouble labor categorisation systems. Instead, the designation of unskilled performs an important political function: it makes low wages appear logical, long working hours appear normal, and the absence of labor protections appear administratively convenient. Indian women domestic workers thus find themselves employed in jobs that require near-constant alertness and adaptability, yet are officially treated as if their labor were interchangeable and easily replaceable. The private household as a workplace adds another layer of irony to this arrangement. Because it is framed as a personal rather than professional space, the household effectively shields labor relations from scrutiny, turning violations into "misunderstandings" and exhaustion into a presumed part of the job. Overwork, isolation, verbal humiliation, and psychological distress become normalised experiences, spoken about quietly in phone calls home or shared cautiously among fellow workers on rare days off. Visibility, in this context, is a double-edged sword: domestic workers are always seen in the sense of being constantly present, yet rarely seen as workers entitled to boundaries or rights. For women employed outside private homes– in hospitality, retail, healthcare, or corporate environments –the picture looks more polished but is no less gendered. These workplaces are governed by formal contracts, dress codes, and performance metrics, yet they remain structured by assumptions about femininity, obedience, and emotional labor. Indian women in service-sector roles are often expected to be endlessly patient, pleasant, and accommodating, performing not only their job descriptions but also a carefully managed affect that reassures employers and customers alike. Professional women encounter subtler hierarchies: wage disparities explained away as market variation, limited promotion opportunities justified through vague references to "fit" or "experience," and sexual harassment reframed as misunderstanding or cultural difference. In both domestic and professional spaces, gendered expectations shape not only how work is performed but how grievances are interpreted—women who complain risk being labeled difficult, ungrateful, or insufficiently adaptable. Humour, when it appears, is often gallows humour: jokes about being "part of the family" that come without family privileges, or about contracts that promise eight-hour workdays while quietly requiring twelve. Yet within these constrained environments, Indian women migrants are far from passive. They cultivate coping strategies that are as pragmatic as they are creative, forming informal networks that function as emotional lifelines and survival infrastructures. Religious gatherings double as information exchanges, WhatsApp groups circulate advice on employers and legal procedures, and brief moments of leisure are invested with disproportionate importance as reminders of selfhood beyond work. Strategic compliance becomes a skill in itself—knowing when to speak, when to remain silent, and when to plan an exit that minimises risk. Transnational communication plays a crucial role, allowing women to sustain identities as daughters, mothers, and decision-makers even while physically absent, though this emotional labor often adds to rather than alleviates exhaustion. Taken together, these workplace experiences reveal a labor regime that relies heavily on women's adaptability while offering little institutional flexibility in return. The humour embedded in this system is not accidental but structural: a migration economy that depends on women's skills insists on calling them unskilled, a governance framework that demands emotional labor refuses to acknowledge emotion, and workplaces that cannot function without women's presence systematically minimise their claims. Understanding gendered labor segmentation in the UAE therefore requires paying attention not only to contracts and sectors but to the everyday absurdities through which inequality is made to appear normal—and through which women, quietly and persistently, continue to make lives within it. What makes this gendered segmentation particularly resilient is its ability to disguise itself as common sense. After all, the logic goes, caring comes naturally to women, patience is a feminine virtue, and endurance is simply part of the migrant bargain—assumptions repeated so often that they begin to sound like facts rather than ideologies. Indian women migrants quickly learn that competence is rewarded with more work rather than better conditions, and reliability often results in expanded responsibilities without renegotiation of pay. The language of appreciation—"she is very good," "like family," or "very cooperative"—circulates freely, functioning as symbolic currency in place of material recognition. In professional spaces, performance appraisals may praise dedication while quietly overlooking promotion, producing careers that advance horizontally

rather than vertically. Humour becomes a subtle coping mechanism here as well, with women joking about multitasking as an Olympic sport or about learning patience as an unintended qualification of migration. Yet beneath this humour lies a sharp awareness of inequality and a careful calculation of risk. Complaints are weighed against visa dependency, silence against survival, and exit against uncertainty. These everyday negotiations reveal that gendered labor segmentation is not merely imposed from above but sustained through repeated interactions that normalise imbalance. By paying attention to these mundane dynamics, the analysis moves beyond abstract categories to show how gendered power is reproduced daily–often politely, sometimes absurdly, and almost always at women's expense.

Migration, Morality, and the Regulation of Women's Bodies:

One of the most striking gendered aspects of UAE migration policy is the regulation of morality. Laws governing sexual relationships, pregnancy outside marriage, and cohabitation disproportionately affect women migrants, placing them at heightened legal risk. Indian women who become pregnant outside marriage may face detention, deportation, or forced return, regardless of consent or coercion (Pande, 2014; Rahman and Al-Batniji, 2020). These policies reflect broader patriarchal anxieties surrounding women's mobility and sexuality. Women migrants are constructed simultaneously as caregivers and moral threats, reinforcing the need for surveillance and control. Such governance extends state power into the intimate realms of women's bodies and relationships. What distinguishes moral regulation within the UAE migration regime is not only its severity but its selective application, as women's bodies become sites where legal authority, cultural anxiety, and migration control converge. Moral laws do not operate in isolation; they are embedded within sponsorship arrangements that amplify women's vulnerability by tying legal residence to personal conduct. For Indian women migrants, this produces a climate of constant self-monitoring, where ordinary aspects of adult life—friendship, intimacy, pregnancy—are transformed into potential legal liabilities. The threat of moral violation disciplines behaviour even in the absence of enforcement, encouraging discretion, silence, and strategic invisibility. Importantly, these regulations rarely account for power asymmetries or coercive circumstances, rendering women responsible for outcomes shaped by unequal relations. In this framework, morality becomes a mechanism of governance rather than a matter of ethics, functioning to stabilise labor arrangements by restricting women's autonomy beyond the workplace. The paradox is striking: women are recruited to perform care, nurture households, and sustain social reproduction, yet are denied legitimacy as sexual and reproductive subjects. By regulating women's bodies so closely, the migration regime reinforces a hierarchy where economic contribution does not translate into bodily or legal autonomy, revealing how control over morality operates as a silent but powerful extension of labor governance.

Transnational Social Reproduction and Emotional Labor:

Indian women migrants play a critical role in sustaining transnational households. Through remittances, they finance education, healthcare, housing, and social mobility for families in India. Yet their contributions extend beyond financial transfers to include emotional labor, caregiving at a distance, and the management of family relationships across borders (Parreñas, 2015). This transnational social reproduction sustains both sending and receiving societies while remaining largely invisible in policy frameworks (Acharya, 2018). Women bear the emotional cost of separation, guilt, and social stigma, particularly in conservative communities where female migration challenges traditional gender norms. Migration thus reshapes gender relations in complex ways. While women gain economic autonomy and decision-making power, they also encounter new forms of control and expectation, both abroad and at home.

Agency, Resistance, and Everyday Negotiations:

Contrary to portrayals of women migrants as passive victims, Indian women in the UAE actively negotiate their circumstances. Agency manifests not only in overt resistance but in subtle, everyday practices such as strategic silence, emotional negotiation, and selective compliance. Women form informal solidarities through shared housing, religious gatherings, and digital platforms. These networks provide emotional support, information exchange, and collective problem-solving. Technology, particularly mobile phones and social media, enables women to maintain transnational identities and assert control over their narratives. Recognising these forms of agency is essential for avoiding reductive victimhood

frameworks and for understanding migration as a dynamic, lived process.

Role of the Indian State and Bilateral Frameworks:

The Indian state occupies an ambivalent position in relation to women's migration. While remittances are celebrated as a development resource, women migrants are often framed as subjects requiring protection rather than rights. Restrictive policies, such as age bans on domestic work migration, have had limited success and unintended consequences. Bilateral agreements between India and the UAE have focused primarily on labor supply and dispute resolution, with insufficient attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities. Consular support mechanisms remain overstretched and reactive, leaving many women without effective assistance. A shift from protective paternalism toward rights-based engagement is necessary to address structural inequalities in migration governance.

Toward Gender-Responsive Migration Governance:

Gender-responsive migration governance requires rethinking policy priorities, institutional frameworks, and underlying assumptions about labor and citizenship. This includes recognising domestic work as skilled labor, extending labor protections to all sectors, and ensuring migrants' mobility and legal autonomy. For the UAE, meaningful reform entails moving beyond symbolic protections toward enforceable rights and accountability mechanisms. For India, it involves strengthening recruitment regulation, expanding pre-departure training, and enhancing consular capacity. At a broader level, gender-responsive governance demands that migration be understood not merely as labor mobility but as a human process embedded in social reproduction, care, and dignity.

Conclusion:

The gendered dimensions of UAE migration policy reveal how migration governance operates as a system of power that differentially shapes men's and women's lives. Indian women migrants occupy a central yet marginalised position within this system, sustaining households, economies, and care infrastructures across borders while navigating legal precocity and moral regulation. By foregrounding their experiences, this article challenges dominant migration narratives and calls for a reorientation of policy toward feminist, human-centred principles. Recognising Indian women migrants as social actors rather than expendable labor is not merely an ethical imperative but a necessary step toward equitable and sustainable migration futures in the Gulf and beyond taken together, the analysis presented in this article demonstrates that UAE migration governance cannot be understood merely as a technical framework for managing labor mobility, but must be read as a gendered system of power that structures visibility, vulnerability, and value in deeply unequal ways. Indian women migrants emerge not as peripheral participants but as central actors in sustaining the everyday functioning of households, service economies, and transnational social reproduction across the Gulf–South Asia corridor. Yet this centrality exists alongside systematic marginalisation, as legal dependency, moral regulation, and occupational segmentation converge to produce forms of precarity that are distinctly gendered. The contradiction is striking: women's labor is essential to economic efficiency and social stability, while their autonomy remains tightly constrained by policies that render them temporary, replaceable, and morally governable. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, this study challenges dominant migration narratives that privilege male mobility, economic metrics, and policy neutrality, revealing instead how governance operates through intimate domains of life such as care, time, emotion, and the body. The findings underscore that gender inequality in migration is not an unintended byproduct of labor demand but an organising principle embedded within migration regimes themselves. Importantly, recognising Indian women migrants as social actors does not romanticise resilience or obscure exploitation; rather, it shifts analytical attention toward the structural conditions that compel endurance while limiting choice. A feminist, human-centred approach to migration governance thus requires moving beyond reactive protections and symbolic reforms toward substantive transformations that acknowledge care work as skilled labor, decouple legal status from employer control, and address moral regulation as a form of labor discipline. Such a reorientation demands responsibility not only from receiving states like the UAE but also from sending states such as India, whose regulatory frameworks often oscillate between celebration of remittances and paternalistic protectionism. More broadly, the experiences of Indian women migrants illuminate the limits of temporary labor migration models that rely on permanent uncertainty to sustain economic growth. Equitable and sustainable migration futures in the Gulf

will depend on confronting these limits directly—by recognising migrants not as transient labor units but as gendered human beings whose rights, aspirations, and dignity cannot be indefinitely postponed. In doing so, this article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that insists migration policy must be evaluated not only by its efficiency but by the lives it shapes, constrains, and enables across borders.

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