

Precarity, Food Insecurity, and Migration: The Kerala-Gulf Nexus and Women Domestic Workers

Anand Panamthottam Cherian



Migration & Food Security (MiFOOD)

Paper No. 31

Series Editors: Sujata Ramachandran and Jonathan Crush

Abstract

Low-skilled Malayali women migrants employed as domestic laborers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ countries navigate a transnational labor system that entrenches gendered hierarchies and structural inequalities. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kerala and the United Arab Emirates utilizing biographical methods such as life history and oral history reveals that migration, often envisioned as a pathway to economic security, intensifies vulnerabilities through layers of exclusion, exploitation, and deprivation. These women's lived experiences underscore the precarious conditions that define their labor trajectories, shaped by systemic governance failures and socio-cultural dynamics.

Food security, positioned at the nexus of material survival and symbolic significance, emerges as a contested site of power and dignity. For these migrant workers, access to food serves as a daily negotiation of belonging, reflecting broader socio-political asymmetries. The denial of adequate nutrition functions as a mechanism of control and manifests as structural violence, amplifying their marginalization within labor markets reliant on their invisibility. The biopolitical governance of food insecurity underscores its dual role as both a catalyst for migration and an outcome of exploitative global labor systems.

By engaging critically with the linkages between migration, gender, and labor, this analysis highlights how the systemic marginalization of low-wage migrant women perpetuates cycles of precarity. Food insecurity, far from being a mere indicator of economic deprivation, exposes the deeper dynamics of dispossession and control that characterize their experiences. These findings call for a fundamental rethinking of labor governance to foreground the dignity, rights, and well-being of migrant workers in transnational migration circuits.

Keywords

women domestic workers, food insecurity, gender, migrant precarity, Kerala, Gulf countries

Suggested Citation

Panamthottam Cherian, A. (2024). Precarity, Food Insecurity, and Migration: The Kerala-Gulf Nexus and Women Domestic Workers. MiFOOD Paper No. 31, Waterloo.

Author

Anand Panamthottam Cherian, International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India, and Institute for Immigration Research, George Mason University, USA: apanamth@gmu.edu

Cover Image

Kanji, a rice gruel consumed in Kerala. Credit: [vm2002/Alamy](#)



This is the 31st Working Paper in the MiFOOD Working Paper series published by the Hungry Cities Partnership, an international network of cities and organizations that focuses on building sustainable cities and urban food systems in the Global South. The seven-year collaborative MiFOOD project is funded by a Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

© Anand Panamthottam Cherian

Published by the Hungry Cities Partnership at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Introduction

In the final days of fieldwork in 2023, I sat in the modest home of Fathima, a Malayali return migrant from Kollam district in the southern state of Kerala in India. The interview, intended to explore the contours of her migration experience as a domestic worker in Bahrain, offered a window into the myriad struggles faced by low-wage women migrants from Kerala working in the Gulf region. A Muslim woman in her early forties, Fathima had left Kerala to secure a better future for her family, mainly to fund her child's education, manage the healthcare costs for her ailing husband, and fulfill the aspiration of building a house back home. Yet, the reality of migration, she explained, was far more precarious than she had anticipated. During our conversation, Fathima voiced a poignant sentiment that encapsulates the essence of this paper: "Food is everything, and being a migrant means you do not belong." This simple yet profound declaration emerged as a narrative thread that tied together her and other migrant domestic workers' experiences of multiple forms of exclusion, exploitation, and deprivation with food insecurity. Fathima's narrative, like many other Malayali migrant women working as domestic workers in the Gulf countries, is framed by her pursuit of food security and a stable livelihood for her family. However, the act of migration, instead of providing stability and economic security, often resulted in *precarization* – an unrelenting struggle to access food, secure wages, and navigate an unfamiliar cultural landscape where she was made to feel like an outsider (Sassen, 2016; Wee et al., 2019).

This paper seeks to unpack the intricate connections between migration, food security, and precarity for Malayali domestic migrant women laborers who navigate the complex transnational spaces between Kerala and GCC countries. Through socio-anthropological research approaches, the analysis underscores how migration, while promising economic betterment and food security, often exacerbates social exclusion, exploitation, and deprivation for these workers. It explores how food security, as a central aspect of human well-being, becomes a site of struggle for migrant women, further shaped by the asymmetries of power, gendered labor systems, and the failures of migration governance. In framing the issue of food insecurity and precarity among low-wage migrant women from Kerala to the Gulf, the paper adopts a critical understanding of how labor migration systems function not simply as economic processes but as profoundly entrenched mechanisms that reproduce social hierarchies.

The paper employs ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork in two critical locations across seven months: Kollam and Kannur districts in Kerala (January to May 2023) and Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) (June and July 2023). The biographical method was adopted for research, including life history and oral history. It allowed an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of Malayali migrant women domestic workers. This approach can offer rich personal narratives that are often unvoiced and invisible, particularly for subaltern groups who exist at the margins of social and academic discourses. Participant life history can generate

valuable qualitative research data to address the glaring gaps and absences in the study of marginalized cohorts, particularly within contexts characterized by significant social diversity (Bornat, 2004; Freeman, 1992; Smith., 2012).

The first section situates the migration of women as domestic workers within the Kerala-Gulf labor migration system. The second section examines the lived experiences of women migrants in the GCC countries, who often find themselves in conditions akin to domestic servitude. Through their narratives, it becomes evident how structural inequalities, particularly gendered and classed hierarchies, entrench these women into vicious cycles of exploitation. The third and fourth sections turn to an analysis of migrant food security as it intersects with broader socio-political structures of marginalization. By examining how migration status, employment conditions, and gender mediate food access, this section seeks to unpack how it devalues specific lives. The deprivation faced by these women migrants is not incidental but systematically embedded in the very labor systems that rely on their exploitation. Food insecurity becomes a marker of a broader reification of hierarchies, serving as a physical and symbolic representation of whose bodies and lives are deemed expendable in the global labor market. This analysis foregrounds how food, as a fundamental requirement, is enmeshed in power relations that render certain populations as "non-belonging" or disposable.

Kerala-Gulf Migration Corridor and Low-Skilled Women Migrants

The migration of Malayalis to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has profoundly reshaped the socio-economic and cultural landscape of Kerala, a state characterized by its robust linkages with the global labor dynamics (Kannan & Hari, 2020; Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). Migrant remittances account for 36% of Kerala's gross domestic product (GDP), revealing a deep-seated dependency on these financial resources provided by migratory labor (Kannan & Hari, 2020; Prakash, 2022). The implications of this dependency are far-reaching, with approximately one in three individuals in the state directly reliant on the remittances received from overseas employment of their family members and relatives (Rajan & Zachariah, 2020). Since the 1970s, rapid economic expansion fueled by oil revenues in the GCC has catalyzed noticeable flows of residents from Kerala to these countries. Personal and household aspirations for enhanced employment opportunities, improved living conditions and broader socio-economic aspirations, including food security, have driven these flows. The socio-economic profile of Kerala, marked by achievements in social sectors and robust welfare systems, has played a crucial role in the state's ability to navigate crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2021). This resilience can be traced back to the accumulation of human capital facilitated by large-scale emigration, which has shaped a unique developmental trajectory. While the influx of remittances has significantly bolstered the state's economy, it also produces potential long-term vulnerabilities, as overreliance on these funds may engender economic stagnation and limit local investment opportunities.

Migration, particularly to the Gulf, is not merely an economic strategy; it is a cornerstone of identity and social mobility for many in the state, shaping household dynamics, community relations, and even state policies (Beaugrand & Thiollet, 2023; Gardner, 2010; Osella & Osella, 2000). The impact of migration to the Gulf region thus extends beyond economic considerations, embedding itself within the social fabric of Kerala and reshaping networks for livelihoods, access to resources, and social institutions. This transformation underscores the state's distinctive development model, prioritizing consumerism over sustainable investment. This dynamic that has led to an unrestrained expansion of consumption without a corresponding increase in productive capacity (Parayil & Sreekumar, 2003). Moreover, the interplay of migration and local socio-economic conditions invites a critical examination of how these labor migration patterns affect individual livelihoods in Kerala and redefine collective identities and social relationships within and outside families.

Women are an important section of domestic migrant workers across the Kerala-Gulf labor migration system (Figure 1). The decision to migrate, particularly for women from Kerala's lower socioeconomic strata, serves as an act of aspiration and necessity shaped by their systemic constraints. At the same time, the intensification of migratory flows among women from Kerala to the Gulf States has engendered various forms of precarity, which are the direct and indirect outcomes of these mobilities (Osella, 2014; Rajan & Joseph, 2020). Among the most pressing issues related to this phenomenon is the pervasive food insecurity experienced by many of these migrants and their left-behind families. This precarious situation is particularly evident in the burgeoning numbers of low-skilled female domestic workers, constituting a significant segment of the migrant workforce. As articulated by Basila, a middle-aged migrant woman working in Dubai, the compulsion to migrate is not

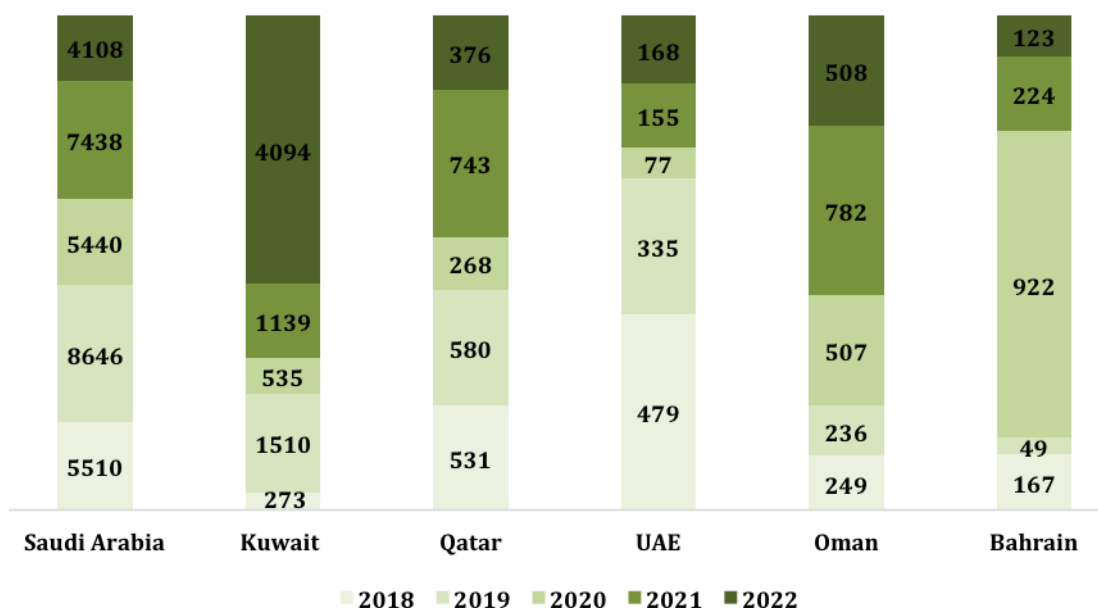
merely a choice. Instead, it is an individual and household response to the socioeconomic pressures they face in Kerala:

We are pushed to go for work. That's sadly our situation. Kerala has improved a lot, and we can't just live with the ration; for that, we have to go abroad. The only way to go for us is as domestic laborers. At least it will give food for my children and education and eventually a house.

Using her own words, "home" and "food" constituted recurring motifs in her migration journey—aspirations that initially motivated her departure from Kerala but became constant sources of anxiety during her time in Bahrain. These themes, echoed in the narratives of many of my interlocutors, illuminate the broader structural vulnerabilities faced by low-waged female migrants. The metaphor of food as a representation of well-being, recurrent in these accounts, reveals the profound interrelation between economic survival and physical sustenance. Within the narratives analyzed in this paper, migration transcends the pursuit of employment abroad; it emerges as a strategic response aimed at ensuring the basic subsistence of families, often articulated through the lens of achieving food security (Choithani, 2013; Philips, 2018). This transformation from metaphorical nourishment to tangible food access underscores the critical role migration plays in potentially mitigating the vulnerabilities experienced by women left with few viable options at home.

The intensification of migration within the Kerala-Gulf corridor, particularly by women in low-wage sectors, reveals a broader socio-economic structure where labor is commodified in exchange for survival (Rajan et al., 2024). Many of my interlocutors in Kollam and Kannur hold only a 10th-grade education or have not completed their schooling. This limited educational attainment is emblematic of the structural barriers that restrict upward mobility, especially in Kerala's

Figure 1: Indian Migrant Women Workers in GCC Countries, 2018-2022



Source: Ministry of External Affairs, 2022

gendered labor market. For these women, migration to the Gulf is often the only avenue through which they can escape the local labor market constraints and meet their family's needs, despite knowing their labor will be undervalued abroad. The metaphor of food as well-being translates into the more concrete goal of securing sustenance for their families through remittances. Migrants express a resigned acceptance of their limited opportunities. However, this resignation is tempered by a pragmatism driven by maternal obligation and survival. The emotional toll of their precarious labor conditions and food insecurity is deeply interwoven with their sense of responsibility, manifesting as an ongoing struggle to provide for their children and households. The act of migration, therefore, cannot be understood simply as a response to economic deprivation, rather as a complex decision shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and gendered forces. These women's narratives highlight how migration becomes a necessary strategy to transform the metaphor of food into tangible food security, even as it exposes them to exploitation, wage theft, and deprivation in the Gulf (Akhil & Rajan, 2020).

The focus on securing food and other resources through migration reveals a broader critique of how systemic inequalities in Kerala and the host countries in the Gulf region structure women's labor and lived experiences. Ultimately, the Kerala-Gulf migration corridor serves as a site where aspirations of well-being are both realized and perpetually deferred, leaving women caught in vicious cycles of precarity and marginalization. Many participants expressed a resigned acknowledgment of their limited prospects across this corridor: "We know we don't get any jobs other than this. As we have some connection, we were able to at least go to the Gulf. At least while I was there, I could provide for my family." This sentiment underscores the limited avenues available for upward mobility, which are narrowly channeled through transnational migration. The phrase "provide for my family" not only encapsulates the economic imperative driving migration but also reveals the deep-rooted cultural expectation of familial responsibility that permeates the migrant experience of these women.

The intergenerational aspirations of these individuals are also telling. One interlocutor shared her son's migration intentions: "Now my son is planning to go to the Gulf. At least he is going there for a better job." This statement reflects a prevailing hope that the next generation may achieve a more favorable outcome than their predecessors. The migration of younger family members is often framed as a means of transcending the limitations faced by older generations. It also illustrates how social networks and familial connections play a critical role in navigating the migration landscape, as these links often facilitate entry into foreign labor markets, despite the inherent risks and challenges associated with such movements. Migration emerges as both a necessity and a strategy for survival. It is a response to local economic conditions that render traditional employment avenues insufficient. The reliance on informal networks for migration further emphasizes the interplay between social capital and economic necessity as individuals seek to leverage their connections to secure better livelihoods abroad.

This dynamic not only shapes individual trajectories but also contributes to the broader socio-economic fabric of Kollam and Kannur districts where migration has become an entrenched response to systemic inadequacies in the local labor markets.

Migrant Precarity

On the third day of research in Chadayamangalam village in Kollam, I returned to a small, bustling restaurant where I had been taking my meals. The heat outside seeped into the interior filled with fans, where the rhythmic clatter of dishes and murmured conversations formed a backdrop to the scene. It was in this unassuming setting that Amina approached me—a woman shrouded in a *burqa* (enveloping outer garment worn by some Muslim women), her steps measured, but her gaze unflinching. In the tentative exchange that followed, a subtle connection bridged the divide between researcher and local resident. What began as a casual conversation soon unfolded into a story of migration, exploitation, and survival, shared over the rising steam of rice and curry. Amina spoke of her sister, Maimuna, who had left for Oman seven years ago, lured by the promises of a labor recruiter. Her voice, though steady, carried the weight of a shared trauma, borne not only by Maimuna but by countless women from this region. We walked together through the narrow, winding streets of Chadayamangalam, the air thick with the mingled scents of fried snacks and humid earth. As we navigated the labyrinth of alleyways, Amina teased me with a playful remark, "You look like a kid." Her words, light yet disarming, dissolved the unspoken tension, allowing a more profound exchange to unfold. This seemingly offhand comment invited me into her world, a small but significant gesture of inclusion.

Maimuna's home stood modestly at the end of a quiet street, tucked behind a row of houses that had seen better days. The paint was peeling in places, and the courtyard was sparse. But the door was open, and a sense of hospitality seemed to hang in the air before I even stepped inside. Maimuna greeted us with a soft smile that did not quite reach her eyes. Her hands, worn and cracked from years of labor, spoke of another life, far removed from the home where we now sat. She motioned for us to sit on the floor, where a woven mat stretched beneath our feet. It was cooler inside, shaded from the harsh sun outside, but there was a stillness in the room that felt heavy, almost suffocating. As I listened, Maimuna spoke of migration with a mix of hope and regret. She talked of her dream to go to Saudi Arabia, where so many from her village had gone before her. "I thought it would be different for me," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, her hands resting in her lap. Her story began with a cousin, a migration broker or intermediary, who had painted vivid, positive images of wealth and comfort as a migrant worker in the Gulf. The promise of a job as a saleswoman and the allure of a salary that would change her family's life all seemed within reach. However, when she arrived in Saudi Arabia, she found herself not in a store filled with customers but in the private domain of a wealthy Arab family, caring for their children, cooking their meals, looking after their home and taking care of all household chores.

I noticed the shift in her posture as she recounted this part, her body tense as if resisting the memory. The light filtering through the open window cast shadows across her face, deepening the lines etched by years of hard work and disappointment. Her barely masked disdain for the migrant recruiter, once a trusted relative, crackled in the air between us. “Thirty thousand,” she said, shaking her head, her tone bitter. “They promised me forty, but after three months, they cut it.” Her words fell heavily into the room, landing between us with the finality of something deeply felt but rarely spoken. The months turned into years, and in that time, the job that had once held so much promise became a prison. Maimuna spoke slowly, carefully, as if each word carried the weight of her experience. She talked about the endless tasks, the isolation, and her growing despair as she realized she had no way out. “No one to speak to,” she said. “I didn’t know the language. I didn’t even know how to leave if I wanted to.” Her eyes flickered toward the door as if checking that it was still open, that her freedom was no longer just a distant idea.

Then, after a long pause, Maimuna talked about the night her employer crossed the line. She recounted her experience with visible discomfort, detailing the shift in his behavior from professional distance to overtly inappropriate advances. Despite her constant refusal, the rejection came at a significant personal cost. One evening, she was forced out of the residence where she had been working, and her belongings were left inside. She found herself standing alone in the streets of an affluent neighborhood, a stark contrast to her precarious position as a migrant worker. Maimuna’s narrative highlights a critical dimension of forced labor within the context of transnational migration, exacerbated by her inability to communicate in Arabic and the absence of a support network. Over four years and eight months, she endured a cycle of exploitation that reached a harrowing peak during the COVID-19 pandemic. This period marked a turning point when her employer attempted to exert further control over her, culminating in sexual harassment. Her refusal to acquiesce to these demands resulted in her eviction from the employer’s home at night, leaving her vulnerable and isolated. The incident highlights the vulnerability faced by low-wage migrant women, whose refusal to comply with exploitative demands often results in immediate displacement and social isolation. It further underscores the power imbalances inherent in the employer-worker relationship for female migrant domestic workers.

Maimuna’s voice quivered when she spoke of the people who finally helped her—strangers, some kind, some only curious. Eventually, she made it back to Kerala. However, the story did not end with her return. Her employer retained her passport, and the invisible tether still pulled at her. “They think they own you,” she said quietly. Her eyes, however, were defiant. “But I will never go back.” The small room appeared to hold the weight of her story, the walls pressing in with each word. Outside, life continued—the faint sounds of children playing, the distant rumble of a motorbike—but inside, time felt suspended, as if Maimuna’s experience had transported us to another world. The smell of spices from the kitchen mingled with the air, grounding me in the present, yet her words lingered, leaving an aftertaste of something

bitter, something unresolved. Her familial ties back home, comprising her mother, brothers, and sisters, provided a semblance of support. However, the stark reality was that her prospects for formal employment were bleak in Kerala. While she managed to send remittances to her relatives from Saudi Arabia, the burden of care for her family weighed heavily on her, reflecting the complicated interplay between economic necessity and social obligation that characterized her precarious migration experience.

Maimuna’s narrative epitomizes the complex and multifaceted symbolic and sexual violence that shapes the migration trajectories of Malayali women to the GCC countries. Her experience underscores the intersection of socio-cultural dynamics and structural inequalities that shape the lived realities of female migrants. In the context of globalization, where labor markets in the Gulf rely on migrant workers, Malayali women domestic workers from Kerala often find themselves navigating perilous pathways marked by exploitation and abuse (Deshingkar, 2021; Gupta, 2024; Varghese, 2020). The migration process is not only a journey toward economic opportunities but also a fraught venture into unfamiliar environments with different cultural norms, and where labor regulations, and frameworks of migrant protection are either inadequate or absent (Munck, 2013).

Denial of Food

Throughout fieldwork, a recurring phrase echoed through the narratives of the women participants: “*Njangalk evade kadhikan undarunu, pakshe kanji mathram kudichal poralo* [Back there we had food to eat, but we can’t eat rice gruel every time, right?]”. This simple yet poignant expression encapsulates their memories of sustenance, signifying not just a longing for the material security of their past but also the persistent struggle to meet familial obligations amidst the scarcity they encountered as migrant workers. Through this lens, food security emerges as a profound analytical category for understanding the complex and intersecting dimensions of migration, labor exploitation, and social exclusion that characterize the experiences of low-wage migrant women from Kerala in the Gulf.

One afternoon, I sat across from Sajna in her modest home, sunlight seeping through the cracked shutters, casting uneven shadows across the room. The hissing of a pressure cooker from the kitchen broke the silence, mingling with the faint hum of a ceiling fan. Sajna’s demeanor reflected the exhaustion of a life spent traversing multiple geographies and their outcomes—home and abroad, and of belonging and estrangement. She bore the physical and emotional marks of years spent in servitude, working in homes where she was simultaneously indispensable yet excluded. As we spoke, Sajna recounted her time working as a domestic worker in the Gulf. Soft yet deliberate, her voice carried the weight of an experience that had been silently rehearsed many times in her mind. “They would eat first,” she said, her eyes narrowing slightly as if recalling the image of her employer’s dining table. “I was expected to wait until they were done.” The act of being made to wait for her employer to finish eating, only to be left with leftovers – cold, hardened,

and often stale – was, for Sajna, a daily reminder of her marginal status within the household. She was also given food on separate plates not used by her employers, which were old and chipped. This treatment was not simply about hunger; but a deliberate reinforcement of her position as an outsider whose needs were inherently subordinate. Her account offers more than an intimate glimpse into the material deprivation experienced by domestic workers. It reveals food's symbolic weight in maintaining hierarchies of power and exclusion. The repeated actions of being served leftover food that had lost its flavor and warmth exemplify the structural inequality embedded in everyday practices within the household. Sajna's narrative is far from unique. It reflects a broader pattern among migrant women in the Gulf, whose access to food often mirrors their precarious position within the social and labor hierarchies of the destination countries.

Another participant, Padmini, who had worked as a domestic worker in Bahrain, described how her employer fed her leftovers while their family consumed a diverse and nutritious diet. Padmini's attempts to gain better access to food were met with threats of dismissal, and her isolation from the local community compounded her inability to seek help. Likewise, Sajna's reflection on being given worn-out, damaged utensils illuminates the processes of dehumanization that shape the lives of migrant domestic workers. The segregation of food and utensils for these domestic workers is not merely a question of material difference; it signals the deep social boundaries that delineate belonging and exclusion within Gulf households. These practices, though seemingly mundane, carry profound implications for how migrant workers are perceived and treated. They are not seen as integral members of the household but as disposable laborers whose needs are always secondary and often overlooked.

These narratives underscore the intricate ways in which food – both its presence and absence – mediates the migration experiences of these Malayali women. Food also becomes a focal point in articulating migrant women's survival struggles in the Gulf. For many, eating or being denied an adequate supply of food functions as a daily negotiation of their place within a profoundly stratified system of labor that thrives on their invisibility. This is a transnational system where their labor is essential, but their humanity is often overlooked. The leftovers, cold and hardened, are not simply food; they are material symbols of the marginalization these women face. Sitting in her home in Kollam, with her young daughter by her side, another participant, Sameera, recalled the disorienting contrast between the familiar flavors of her homeland and the alien, often unpalatable foods she consumed during her years abroad. "It wasn't just about the food," she said. "It was like a constant reminder that I didn't belong."

In these stories, food emerges not simply as a necessity for survival but as a marker of belonging and identity. The absence of familiar food, the relegation to leftovers, and the denial of the shared eating rituals all reinforce the social isolation these women experience in the Gulf. This isolation, compounded by physical and emotional exhaustion, often

leads to embodied consequences—weight gain, diabetes, and mental health struggles like depression—further entrenching their precarious position within the labor system. Sajna and Sameera's accounts illustrate how the narratives of food scarcity and deprivation intertwine with broader themes of social suffering. These narratives not only reflect individual experiences of exclusion but also speak to the structural conditions that perpetuate the exploitation of migrant women in the Gulf. In this context, food becomes a powerful analytic lens through which to examine the intersecting forces of migration, labor, and exploitation. The everyday act of eating – or being denied the dignity of eating – reveals the profound ways in which power operates in the lives of migrant women. Through this lens, we can comprehend the totality of their experiences, not just as migrant labor, but as human beings navigating the fraught terrain of survival in a hostile world.

Women domestic workers occupy the lowest rungs of the labor hierarchy in the origin countries and destination countries, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization. Their work is intimate, often taking place within the private sphere of the household, which is shielded from public scrutiny, rendering them and the exploitation they encounter invisible. In these settings, the boundaries between personal and professional life blur, and domestic workers often find themselves at the mercy of their employers' whims. The deprivation they face is not only economic but also social, emotional, and physical as they navigate the precarious terrain of migration, where they are simultaneously needed and marginalized (Fernandez, 2021; Lori, 2019; Mahdavi, 2016). The employer's failure to provide even the most basic amenities—sufficient food, decent living conditions, or fair wages—reflects a broader system of dehumanization, where the labor of migrant women is commodified, and their well-being is secondary, if not entirely disregarded.

Migrant Food Insecurity and Biopolitics

The socio-cultural dynamics of Gulf migration and its relationship with food security can be understood through the prism of biopolitics, a concept elucidated by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 2003, 2007). The state exercises power by regulating populations, particularly through control over life-sustaining resources like food. In this case, food insecurity becomes a tool of governance, shaping not only the material conditions of existence for individuals but also the cultural and social frameworks within which they live. The uneven distribution of food and, by extension, life chances, become a mechanism through which marginalized groups, particularly low-wage women migrants, are coerced into migratory labor in search of better opportunities. Food insecurity acts as both a catalyst for migration and an effect of broader economic systems that perpetuate inequality (Collinson, 2009; Ness, 2023). It compels women, especially from underprivileged backgrounds, to migrate under precarious conditions, hoping to secure additional fiscal resources for their families. The biopolitical project of food security

reinforces these power dynamics by dictating how women are expected to provide for their families, often positioning them within a framework of moral responsibility and self-sacrifice (Carney, 2015). Under this logic, food security initiatives often operate under the guise of development or aid but paradoxically perpetuate the very deprivation they aim to alleviate. This dynamic reflects a form of structural violence, where access to food – and by extension, survival – is regulated as a mechanism of governance over migrant bodies. The governance of food access becomes an insidious tool of control, imposing systemic inequities that shape the lives of migrant women. For domestic workers, in particular, this biopolitical control manifests not through overt physical coercion but through routine acts of exclusion that define their lived experiences. Restrictions on what, when, and how they are allowed to eat serve to marginalize them further, reinforcing their precarious position within social and economic hierarchies. These exclusions leave lasting imprints on the bodies of migrant domestic workers, manifesting in physical hunger, chronic illness, and psychological distress. The structural violence inherent in these practices inscribes their exploitation in everyday acts, turning the basic human need for food into a site of control and subjugation. By denying these workers equitable access to nourishment, the broader economic systems they inhabit systematically erode their well-being, rendering their marginalization both visible and enduring.

Take the story of Shyamala, a return migrant from Bahrain whose narrative highlights this entanglement. Driven by the persistent food insecurity faced by her family in Kerala, she took on low-wage domestic work in the Gulf, only to encounter exploitative recruitment practices and wage theft. Her situation did not improve her family's food security. Instead, it subjected her to a different set of biopolitical constraints imposed by migration systems that exploit labor and perpetuate food insecurity through the denial of wages and basic human rights. In this way, Shyamala's experience exemplifies the cyclical relationship between the biopolitics of food insecurity and the structures meant to address it, reinforcing her marginalization as a woman and a migrant. This larger perspective shows how the structural violence inherent in food insecurity intersects with migration decisions and labor exploitation, shaping the lives of women like Shyamala in ways that continually reinforce their precarious position in the global economy. The cycle of deprivation persists as the promise of food security remains elusive, governed by transnational systems of power that benefit from women's labor while denying them the resources they need to thrive.

In the interviews with return migrant workers, food emerges as a central theme in how workers assess their employers' attitudes and working conditions. Food becomes a means of communication, both literally and figuratively. For example, one return migrant described how her employer's refusal to provide adequate food was a daily reminder of her subordinate position within their household. However, she noted that despite these conditions, she considered herself fortunate because she had not experienced physical violence, unlike other workers who were both underfed and physically assaulted. This example illustrates how workers navigate a

hierarchy of harms, where dehumanization is normalized, and withholding of food is sometimes perceived as a lesser form of violence. The withholding or control of food serves as a physical and symbolic expression of power (Carney, 2014; Ham & Ceradoy, 2022). Food security is deeply embedded within broader socio-political and economic structures, where marginalization is both shaped and perpetuated by global labor systems. Rather than a direct issue of resource access, food insecurity reflects stratified systems of power that sustain the exclusion and exploitation of vulnerable populations. In this context, the precarious condition of food insecurity is a critical analytical lens to interrogate the broader mechanisms through which these populations are systematically devalued and rendered expendable.

For low-wage women migrants in the Gulf States, the experience of food deprivation is not a contingent or isolated event but rather a direct consequence of their entanglement in transnational labor markets that thrive on the commodification of marginalized bodies. The structural conditions that facilitate the global flow of labor reproduce hierarchies of exclusion, within which food insecurity is emblematic of deep forms of subjugation. The intersection of migration status and gender compounds these women's vulnerability, subjecting them to a dual marginalization that is both economic and sociolegal. As non-citizens in the Gulf, they occupy a precarious, liminal status—indispensable to the labor market yet systematically denied access to the legal protections afforded to citizens. This precariousness is further exacerbated by the gendered nature of domestic work, which is frequently informal, unregulated, and grossly underpaid, leaving these women exposed to various forms of exploitation.

Conclusion

The paper introduces the lifeworlds of selected Malayali migrant domestic workers and return migrants, whose lives have been shaped and scarred by the promises and failures of migration. Through their narratives, it becomes evident how structural inequalities—particularly gendered and classed hierarchies—entrench these women in cycles of exploitation. Food insecurity, a recurrent theme in these life histories, emerges as a particularly pernicious form of deprivation. Many of these women recounted experiences of inadequate nutrition, wage theft, and severe restrictions on their ability to access food. These conditions are not only indicative of immediate material deprivation but also serve as mechanisms to maintain these social hierarchies. These stories illustrate how food insecurity exacerbates vulnerability, leading to deteriorating health, psychological distress, and a perpetual state of precarity. The paper highlights how these vulnerabilities are not isolated to moments of crisis but sustained through legal, economic, and social systems designed to prioritize capital over human wellbeing.

The paper argues that the food security of migrant domestic workers in GCC countries is more than just access to sustenance. It is a marker of belonging, dignity, and human worth. The denial of the fundamental right to food dehumanizes these migrant domestic workers and minimizes the value of

their lives. The experiences of women participants analyzed in the paper underscore that these migrant workers are degraded economic subjects. While the migrant caregiver's labor ensures the wellbeing of her employer, her own needs, desires, and dignity are subsumed under the employer's power. The employer-worker relationship, thus, becomes a site of interdependence that paradoxically fosters further alienation and dehumanization as the employer's dependence on the worker intensifies the control exerted over the migrant worker's labor and body. The pervasive violence of dehumanization intersects with markers such as gender, food insecurity, and labor exploitation, producing complex outcomes that not only affect the workers' bodily autonomy but also reinforce broader systems of domination.

Dehumanization, therefore, operates across multiple registers—physical, emotional, and symbolic—often blurring the lines between what is legally recognized as violence (physical assault) and what is not (food deprivation). While certain actions may be understood as being unethical, they are not always remedied through institutional channels, particularly in sectors where workers have limited legal recourse. In this way, food becomes a metaphor for power: it can be weaponized, withheld, or provided as an act of control. It also becomes a form of negotiation, where workers use food, or the lack thereof, to gauge their position within the household hierarchy. In approaching the issue of food insecurity among low-wage migrant workers, particularly women in the Gulf States, a broader conceptual framework emerges that links dehumanization, intimate violence, and structural inequities. The guiding idea here is that food insecurity, much like wage theft or physical abuse, becomes a site through which structural violence is enacted. Applied here, food insecurity is not merely about hunger or lack of variety but serves as an instrument through which domestic workers, particularly women, are systematically controlled, marginalized, and dehumanized.

The narratives presented in this paper form a crucial part of the broader socio-anthropological discourse on migrant labor, gender, and class, illustrating how the structural violence of migration is experienced at the level of the body—through hunger, fatigue, and isolation. By focusing on the lived experiences of migrant domestic women, we can begin to unravel the complex intersections of labor, migration, and gendered forms of oppression that characterize the Gulf transnational labor system. In doing so, we can confront the ways in which these women's struggles are rendered invisible, not only by their employers but also by the state and global institutions that fail to protect them. Their stories are powerful reminders of the urgent need to reimagine labor migration policies and practices by centering the dignity and humanity of those most vulnerable within these transnational circuits of labor.

Endnote

- 1 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formally known as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, is a regional intergovernmental organization that functions as a political and economic union. It comprises six member states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

References

- Akhil, C. S. & Rajan, S. I. (2020). Exploitative or ethical? Understanding the labor recruitment practices in the 21st century from Kerala. In Rajan, S. (Ed.) *India Migration Report 2020* (pp. 280-292). Oxon: Routledge.
- Beaugrand, C., & Thiollet, H. (2023). Migration intermediation: revisiting the kafala (sponsorship system) in the Gulf. In Pecoud, A. & Thiollet, H. (Eds.) *Research Handbook on the Institutions of Global Migration Governance* (pp. 341-356). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Bornat, J. (2004). Oral history. In Seale, C., Gubrium, J., & Silverman, D. (Eds.) *Qualitative Research Practice* (pp. 34-47). London: Sage.
- Carney, M. (2014). The biopolitics of 'food insecurity': Towards a critical political ecology of the body in studies of women's transnational migration. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 21(1), 1-18.
- Carney, M. (2015). *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Chathukulam, J., & Tharamangalam, J. (2021). The Kerala model in the time of COVID19: Rethinking state, society and democracy. *World Development*, 137, 105207.
- Choithani, C. (2023). *Migration, food security and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collinson, S. (2009). The political economy of migration processes: An agenda for migration research and analysis. IMI Working Paper No. 12, Amsterdam.
- Deshingkar, P. (2021). Human smuggling, gender and labor circulation in the Global South. In Gallien, M. & Weigand, F. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling* (pp. 326-340). London: Routledge.
- Fernandez, B. (2021). Racialised institutional humiliation through the Kafala. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(19), 4344-4361.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France*. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Cham: Springer.
- Freeman, R. B. (1992). Labor market institutions and policies: Help or hindrance to economic development? *The World Bank Economic Review*, 6(suppl_1), 117-144.
- Gardner, A. (2010). *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and The Indian community in Bahrain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Gupta, S. (2024). Gendered migration infrastructure and socio-spatial rupture: Indian women's migration experiences to the United Arab Emirates. *Applied Mobilities*, 1-17.
- Ham, J., & Ceradoy, A. (2022). "God blessed me with employers who don't starve their helpers": Food insecurity and dehumanization in domestic work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(3), 922-937.
- Kannan, K., & Hari, K. (2020). Revisiting Kerala's gulf connection: half a century of emigration, remittances and their macroeconomic impact, 1972–2020. *The Indian Journal of Labor Economics*, 63, 941-967.
- Lori, N. (2019). *Offshore Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mahdavi, P. (2016). *Crossing the Gulf: Love and Family in Migrant Lives*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2022). Lok Sabha Question No.583: Indian Workers in Gulf Countries. At: <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/35979>
- Munck, R. (2013). Globalization, governance and migration: an introduction. In Munck, R. (Ed.) *Globalization and Migration* (pp. 1-20). London: Routledge.
- Ness, I. (2023). *Migration as Economic Imperialism: How International Labor Mobility Undermines Economic Development in Poor Countries*. London: Polity Press.
- Osella, F. (2014). The (im) morality of mediation and patronage in South India and the Gulf. In Piliavsky, A. (Ed.) *Patronage as Politics in South Asia* (pp. 365-394). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Osella, F., & Osella, C. (2000). *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*. London: Pluto Press.
- Parayil, G., & Sreekumar, T. (2003). Kerala's experience of development and change. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 33(4), 465-492.
- Phillips, K. (2018). *An ethnography of hunger: Politics, subsistence, and the unpredictable grace of the sun*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Prakash, B. (2022) COVID-19 pandemic and exodus of Kerala emigrant workers from GCC countries. Centre for Development Studies Working Paper 507, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Rajan, S. I., Heller, A., & John, A. (2024). Food security among female migrant workers in Kerala returning from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. *Global Food Security*, 41, 100773.
- Rajan, S. I., & Joseph, J. (2020). Migrant domestic workers in the GCC: Negotiating contested politics and contradictory policies. In Rajan, S. I. & Oommen, G. (Eds.) *Asianization of Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries* (pp. 233-246). Cham: Springer.
- Rajan, S. I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2019). Kerala emigrants in the Gulf. In Rajan, S. I., & Saxena, P. (Eds.) *India's Low-Skilled Migration to the Middle East: Policies, Politics and Challenges* (pp. 189-205). Singapore: Palgrave.
- Rajan, I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2020). New evidence from the Kerala Migration Survey, 2018. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 55(4). At: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/4/special-articles/new-evidences-kerala-migration-survey-2018.html>
- Sassen, S. (2016). A massive loss of habitat: New drivers for migration. *Sociology of Development*, 2(2), 204-233.
- Smith, G. (2012). Toward a public oral history. In Ritchie, D. (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of oral history* (429-448). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Varghese, V. J. (2020). An industry of frauds? State policy, migration assemblages and nursing professionals from India. In Bhaas, M. (Ed.) *The Migration Industry in Asia: Brokerage, Gender and Precarity* (pp. 109-131). Singapore: Springer.
- Wee, K., Goh, C., & Yeoh, B. (2019). Chutes-and-ladders: The migration industry, conditionality, and the production of precarity among migrant domestic workers in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(14), 2672-2688.