



Consular Protection in Practice: Case-Based Study of India's Support for Women Migrant Workers in the Gulf

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Abstract:

In this article, the researcher focuses on the gap between the institutional intent and the lived experience of women migrant workers in the Gulf by analysing the consular support framework on female migrant workers in India in the years 2014-2025. Within the last ten years, the Government of India has implemented various initiatives to safeguard its expatriate employees, such as digital grievance redressal platforms, such as the MADAD Portal, controlled recruitment frameworks, such as the e-Migrate System, and the growth of embassy-based shelters and helplines. These projects are an indication of a transition to a more orderly and reactive consular apparatus.

Nevertheless, these mechanisms have not yet worked efficiently, especially with women working in domestic labour in the Gulf countries and labour protection is not sufficient and there is restricted access to institutional assistance. Combining policy analysis with the exemplary case studies, including not only the high-profile cases of crisis intervention in Saudi Arabia but also the more standard practice of shelter-based rescue in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, the article assesses the role of the consular system in India as a protectionist or rather reactive mechanism.

Keywords: Women migrant workers, Consular Protection, Migration and Gender, Gulf Migration, Domestic workers

Introduction

The labour migration of Indians to the gulf has grown tremendously over the decades and women are increasingly involved in this migration with domestic and care work increasing in numbers. Such feminisation of migration has come along with different vulnerabilities since women workers tend to work in the confines of the household, where the formal labour laws are not applicable. Such problems as passport seizures, not paying salaries, physical mistreatment, and social isolation are very popular in the news, and

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they demonstrate the inefficiency of the host country provisions and the necessity of the effective actions of the sending state.

The Government of India, in its turn, since 2014 has intensified its consular support systems to overcome the problems of migrant workers. MADAD Portal and e-Migrate System were also launched to enhance grievance redressal and control recruitment. Also, the Indian embassies in the Gulf countries have increased the shelter homes, emergency helplines, and rescue and repatriation efforts. These steps indicate an institutional acknowledgement of the necessity to provide protection beyond national boundaries.

Yet, the functioning of this framework becomes clearer when examined through concrete instances. As an example, in Saudi Arabia, when an Indian domestic worker was severely abused, an Indian Embassy in Riyadh was quick to intervene. Medical aid, prosecution, and eventual repatriation were made possible by the embassy, which has shown that the consular system of India has the ability to react successfully during a time of acute crisis. But even such cases pose important questions. When it is possible to intervene at the crisis stage, what about those situations that develop to that level in the first place? Part of the solution is the structural constraints of consular outreach. Most of the women employees do not know the support structures in place or are just physically incapacitated by their employers to access them. Some countries, like Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, have witnessed many Indian women hiding in embassy shelters to escape abusive conditions, which means that suffering tends to become apparent once it is too late.

Such a contrast of policy purpose and experience shows the inherent tension in the consular system of India. Although the state has created mechanisms that are more responsive and technologically empowered, they are not evenly distributed and tend to be reactive. In practice, protection is often conditional on the capacity of migrants to reach these systems, and not implemented in preventive systems.

The Framework of Indian Consular Practice: Policy and Practice

In the last ten years, India has established a more organized consular system to help resolve the vulnerabilities of its migrant workforce in the Gulf. Important campaigns like the e-Migrate System are meant to control the recruitment process so that contracts are registered and verified before leaving the country and hence limits the chances of fraudulent activity. In the same way, the MADAD Portal offers an online platform where Indian citizens have the opportunity to file complaints and request embassy support. These mechanisms are complemented with on-ground interventions such as shelter homes operated by the embassies, emergency helplines, and coordination with local authorities to rescue and repatriate.



A more in-depth look at the consular system in India will show that its strengths are most evident during the crisis. *This can be seen in a high-publicity case in 2015 in Saudi Arabia, of Zohra Bibi, an Indian domestic worker, whose infant daughter was severely beaten by the employer.* The event attracted a lot of media coverage because of its brutality and to showcase the high level of vulnerability that women working in the domestic setting were subjected to in the homes.

The Indian Embassy in Riyadh therefore responded by rushing to the rescue of the child and ensuring that the child is treated medically, legal action is taken against the local authorities and finally the worker and her family are safely transported back to India. Intervention highlights the ability of the consular system in India to mobilise resources in the presence of high-risk circumstances, which is responsive, institutionally coordinated, and diplomatically involved.

Nevertheless, the case also reveals the important gaps in the general system. Although there are regulatory mechanisms like the e-Migrate System and grievance redressal systems like the MADAD Portal, the abuse reached a point of extreme before anything was done about it. This indicates the ineffectiveness of preventive measures, especially in the case of domestic work where there is a lack of surveillance and the workers are socially and physically isolated.

In this way, the case explains a common trend in the consular involvement of India: although the system can be effective when a crisis starts being apparent, it cannot do much to stop them or provide access to protection in time. In this regard, consular action does not seem to be an ongoing protective structure but, rather, a reactive system that comes into effect once the damage has been done.

In addition to high-profile crises, the daily operations of the Indian consular system are present in the *number of distress cases of women migrant workers in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in 2018-22.* Several reports at this time reported about Indian women domestic workers who were not paid their wages, abused physically and psychologically, worked long hours and employers took away their passports. A great number of them later resorted to shelters run or assisted by the Indian embassies.

In retaliation, Indian missions increased the application of structural tools including safe houses, emergency call centres, and online complaint systems like the MADAD Portal. Such actions allowed to identify troubled workers, help them to escape the abusive environment, and assist them in returning to India. The existence of embassy-based shelters, especially, proved to be a critical aspect of immediate relief, proving



the practical importance of consular-based infrastructure when it comes to dealing with mundane forms of exploitation.

But the tendency of such cases also points to structural constraints in the system. The reason is that many women only sought these support systems after a long period of distress meaning that they were not able to access consular services promptly or as much as they should have done. Lack of awareness, limited mobility among employer households and reliance on informal networks were among the factors that frequently hindered timely reporting. This means that although there are institutional mechanisms, the coverage is not even, especially to those who most require protection.

Combined, these recurrent cases serve as a structural example of the consular involvement in India: they demonstrate a system that is institutionally available and operationally responsive, but which is constrained in its capacity to and afford universal intervention and accessibility. This trend, when combined with high-profile cases of crisis, supports the overall thesis that the consular system of India can be more successfully used as the response mechanism rather than as the preventive and ongoing protection system.

Towards a More Preventive and Inclusive Consular Framework

The study of the consular involvement of India in the case of women migrant workers in the Gulf shows a sharp shift in the marginal involvement to structured responsiveness. Nevertheless, this development has not been finished. In order to go beyond a reactive to a preventive model of protection, the consular framework needs to fill in the loopholes that are found throughout the migration cycle, especially in the pre-departure, in-service, and grievance redressal phases.

First, the pre-departure regulation and awareness need to be strengthened. Although such systems as the e-Migrate System have enhanced control over the recruitment process, they are not as effective when migrants use informal networks or work with unregistered agents. To minimize vulnerability initially, it is important to ensure that women workers are sufficiently educated on their rights, terms of employment and support systems that they can draw upon.

Second, the availability of consular services has to be improved. The MADAD Portal and other digital platforms are a significant move towards the simplification of grievance redressal. Nonetheless, they can be of limited use to those who are not digital literate or who cannot communicate freely with their employers. This would require the use of complementary offline mechanisms, such as community outreach, collaboration with local organisations, and active involvement of the embassies.



Third, enhanced institutional coordination with host countries is required. The success of consular intervention is often conditional on the legal and administrative frameworks of the Gulf states, in which the institution of domestic work is often not subject to formal protection under labour laws. Bilateral agreements should thus go beyond token commitment to provide enforceable wage, working conditions and dispute resolution standards.

Lastly, the policy of the consulars should be gender sensitive in nature. Women migrant workers are particularly vulnerable because of issues associated with domestic labor and social isolation, as well as the lack of power in employer-employee relations. To deal with them, specific interventions are needed, such as special support services, culturally competent counselling, and the mechanisms that will guarantee safe reporting of abuse.

Conclusion

This article aimed to analyse whether the consular assistance to women migrant workers in the Gulf is a substantive regime of protection or a narrow, reactive measure by India. It can be seen in the analysis that although India has achieved a lot in terms of building its consular system since 2014, the success of this system depends on the circumstances and is uneven.

The growing concern to migrant welfare is reflected in institutional processes like the e-Migrate System and the MADAD Portal and the rising importance of embassies in offering shelter, legal services, and repatriation. These actions have been found to be especially useful during crisis situations when the intervention can be timely to avoid additional injuries and ensure the safe recovery.

Nevertheless, the continued occurrence of distress cases and the slow access to support points at the flaws of a framework that is mainly reactive. Structural barriers such as lack of awareness, mobility, and reliance on host country systems remain to ensure many women workers do not fully enjoy the benefits of available mechanisms. Consequently, the consular protection in many cases serves as a safety net to be invoked once damage has been inflicted, as opposed to acting as a safety system to reduce the risk.

This consular involvement in India is in this sense an expression of a transition between an attitude of neglect and responsiveness, but not full protection. To close this divide, policy needs to be reoriented to access, prevention and gender sensitivity. It is only at that point that the promise of protection can be converted into regular and productive results of women migrant workers in the Gulf.



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