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Gendered migration infrastructure and socio-spatial rupture: Indian women's migration experiences to the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Increasing cross-border mobilities for employment and livelihood opportunities has resulted in greater institutional and regulatory controls over migration. In this paper, through an analysis of the migration infrastructure for women between India and the United Arab Emirates, socio-spatial ruptures are discerned. The paper asserts that in addition to economic and political frameworks, social and cultural mores have been significant in shaping differentiated migration pathways for Indian women, which are conceptualised as, "gendered migration infrastructure". Gendered migration infrastructure for Indian women is founded on normative understandings of domesticity and femininity and consequently, has made migration for women restrictive, circuitous and cumbersome. The failure and interruptions of migration infrastructure has occurred across borders and the differentiated migration pathways thus created lie at the intersection of formal regulations and actors (migration laws, recruitment and skilling organisations, state agents, border controls, civil society and bureaucracy) and informal intermediaries and practices (subagents, bypassing emigration procedures, irregular channels and corruption). By drawing on the narratives of Indian migrant women, the paper highlights the negotiations undertaken by migrant women and the impact of gendered migration infrastructure on their (im)mobilities, migratory experiences, and outcomes. Further, socio-spatial ruptures due to the COVID-19 pandemic created cracks in the migration infrastructure, deepening the precarities faced by migrant women. Overall, the paper aims to contribute to the literature on gendered migration and transnationalism in addition to shedding light on the migration of Indian women across income and legal categories, an under-researched topic currently.

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1. Introduction

The diversification of women's mobility motivations has resulted in increased intermediation of migration pathways by a range of mobility facilitators and controllers. Within the Asian context, migration pathways take distinct forms as these are circular, govern largely temporary migration, are intensely regulated and distinguish between migrants based on income and gender (Goh et al. 2017; Yeoh 2021). The

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United Arab Emirates' (UAE) free-market economy, interconnections with globalising capital and dependence on migrants alongside India's growing unemployment rates (worrying decline in female labour participation rates) make both countries an interesting case study for intensely regulated migratory pathways. India has the largest diaspora in the world, with the largest concentration in the UAE. In 2015 and 2017, the UAE-India corridor experienced the highest volume of migration (World Migration Report 2020). Migrants constitute 88.5% of UAE's population (Bel-Air 2015), approximately 35% are Indians (UN Migration Stock 2019). While accurate figures are unavailable, women constitute approximately 25% of the Indian community in the UAE. While Indians have been historically present in the UAE, the oil boom in the 1970s coincided with the increased outward mobilities of Indians. While early streams of migration were dominated by men, as UAE's economy diversified, women's migration increased gradually. Women are concentrated in feminized occupations, primarily, domestic work, nursing, teaching, hospitality and sales. In recent years, women have begun migrating as homemakers, workers in the knowledge economy, cleaners, officer workers (across sectors and income categories) and entrepreneurs.

In the paper, I use migration infrastructure as an analytical and methodological entry point to highlight the making and operation of migration pathways between India and the UAE. By focusing of socio-spatial ruptures, I build on the conceptualisation of Xiang and Lindquist's migration infrastructure in two ways. I focus on three socio-spatial ruptures which impact the processes of infrastructuring and mobilities. One, I emphasise the socioeconomic and gendered construction of migration infrastructure within the India-UAE migration corridor. The literature on migration infrastructure focuses on low-income migrants and domestic workers. While the paper shows that the majority of regulations govern low-income migrant women, it also highlights the experiences of constructing, complying and evading legality for women across income categories. Patriarchal morality and ethics govern all women but is differentiated based on the perceptions of normative femininity which is integral to migration infrastructures. Two, contrary to the discourse on profit-making by commercial intermediaries because of increased control on women's mobilities, my research shows their withdrawal due to regulatory failures, fragmentation of recruitment and greater accountability. And three, unprecedented global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic further influence the unmaking and (re)making of migration infrastructures. Overall, by highlighting the making and operation of migration infrastructure, the paper shows that migration is a dynamic social process and how migration infrastructure adapts to interruptions and failures.

2. Gendering mobilities

Inspired by differentiated forms of mobility in Asia, the "infrastructural turn" in mobility literature eschews the "crisis-centric narrative" wherein international migration governance is ahistorical, outside of social relations and a border security issue (Shrestha and Yeoh 2018). Instead, the increase in labour migration to the Gulf states in the 1970s and later to other parts of Asia transformed migration governance from restrictions on migration to infrastructural developments that

manage, control and shape migratory pathways, based on the country of origin and destination, class, race and gender (Xiang 2013). The infrastructure turn pays particular attention to the socio-material conditions that mediate and shape mobilities (Lin et al. 2017; Yeoh, 2021). Primarily, the production of legality due to stringent migrant laws had a two-fold impact. One, it led to minimisation of responsibilities for and delegation of risks from the state to the other actors in the migration ecosystem, especially recruitment agents (Goh et al. 2017). And two, tighter and differentiated migration requirements led to the development of infrastructures and it became profitable for intermediaries to participate in the migration infrastructure development process. Intermediaries co-constituted mobility through recruitment contracts, creation and attestation of legal documents, skill trainings, booking tickets and pre-departure orientations to name a few (Xiang, 2013).

Consequently, the migration industry (Baas 2020; Garapich 2008; Hernández-León 2013; Salt and Stein 1997; Schapendonk 2018) developed in response to the infrastructure turn through the growth of commercial intermediaries – recruitment and employment agencies, travel agents and sub-agents – facilitating (im) mobilities by catering to the ebbs and flows of globalising capital and navigating bureaucratic processes. By trying to understand the functioning of commercial intermediaries, scholars have endeavoured to pry open the "black box" of migration and interrogate the "middle space" connecting sending and receiving countries (Lindquist 2010; Lindquist et al. 2012). The in-depth and extensive study of the migration industry and infrastructures highlighted the profit-making motivations of brokers leading to dire and exploitative conditions for migrants, but simultaneously problematises the taken-for-granted vilification of commercial intermediaries. Migration management is embedded in hegemonic power relations – mobility regimes are unequal, facilitating migration for some while restricting it for others (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Conceptualisations such as migration assemblage (Varghese 2020) and migration systems (King 2002) have been integral in capturing the relationality and power differences that constitute cross-border mobilities. Gender is an integral axis to understand structures of power in transnational migration infrastructures. Feminist research has shown that "migration at one scale operates in relation to gender dynamics operating at another scale" (Mattingly 2001). Silvey (2004) for example advocates for a more dynamic understanding of the construction and operation of scales which includes the body, the household, the region, the nation and supranatural organisations. Thus, the different dimensions of migration infrastructure are "within a particular process of order-making" (Xiang 2013). "Migration infrastructure" (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), defined as a multidimensional organisational structure consisting of commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian and social features, provides an understanding of how the different dimensions of migration infrastructure are deeply entangled through their contradictions and collisions. Further, as a departure from "mobilities studies" (Endres, Manderscheid, and Mincke 2018; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2012), migration infrastructure emphasises that the different dimensions of migration infrastructure restrict rather than enhance people's migratory capability.

3. Methodology

To better understand the rich migratory pathways between India and the UAE, I conducted fieldwork in both countries in 2017 and 2020–21. Over the two research periods, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 250 Indian women across income categories in the UAE. In India, recruitment agents, skilling agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), prospective and returned migrants and government officials were interviewed. Ethnographic data collection was undertaken – oral narratives and participant observations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research in 2020–21 employed a mix of in-person and virtual interviews and participant observations.

As the UAE restricts undertaking of research, censors the media and limits the publishing of data, there is a paucity of information on the topic of migratory pathways to the country. In acknowledgement of these limitations, I relied on a mix of sampling methods, the primary of which was purposive sampling – inclusion of participants I deemed important to the study. The criteria for the purposive sampling was to uncover the previously invisiblised presence and experiences of Indian migrant women in the UAE. Therefore, all Indian women who were willing to participate in the research were included. I also employed convenience sampling and snowballing. However, the downside of non-probability sampling was that it is not representative of the entire Indian migrant community in the UAE and potential migrants in India and that selection of interlocutors could reflect my biases.

While women across income categories in the UAE were interviewed,[1] emphasis was placed on locating and interviewing women engaged in occupations other than domestic work and nursing. Even though nursing and domestic work are the two largest professions in which Indian women are engaged in, there has been overwhelming research on their lived experiences. To expand on the prevalent discourse on migratory pathways between India and the UAE, women engaged in teaching, sales, cleaning, entrepreneurship, engineering and medicine, to name a few professions were interviewed. Homemakers were also included. Participation of women across income categories (and by extension, classed positionalities) brought out the complexities of migratory pathways (visa categories, migration laws, use of agents, etc.) and the degree of vulnerabilities experienced by women based on their occupation (regulated, irregular, formal and informal).

Consent was sought before starting the formal interview and all personally identifiable information was removed after the interview. Throughout the paper pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interlocutors. Despite the large focus of the study, in this paper, I concentrate on women who migrated alone for employment. As explained in the next few sections, migration infrastructure controls and regulates the mobilities of women migrating alone. Within this, low- and middle-income women are disproportionately impacted by these migratory regulations.

4. Transnational migration infrastructure

Aligning with the theorisation by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), the migration infrastructure between India and the UAE is comprised of five dimensions, with each closely interlinked and dependent on each other. The Emigration Act of 1983 provides

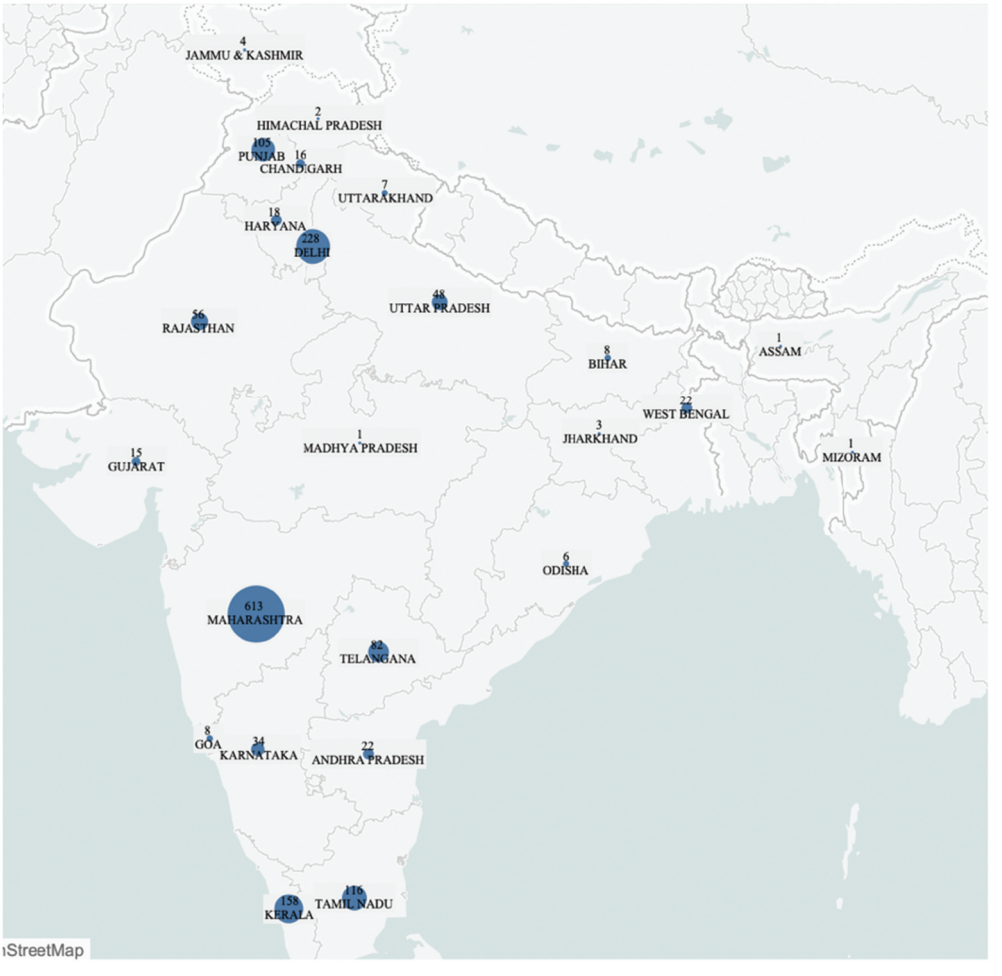
the institutional framework for the *regulatory* dimension in India. The Act segregates citizens based on Emigration Check Required (ECR) and Emigration Check Not Required (ECNR) passports to regulate labour migration. Indians below matriculation[2] are classified as ECR passport holders, requiring clearance before taking up employment in 18 ECR countries.[3] ECR has evolved to include protection mechanisms – stipulated minimum wages, mandatory insurance and a voluntary pre-departure orientation training (PDOT). Alongside, to safeguard the interests of migrants, state-run recruitment agencies were initiated. Despite increasing and diversifying (geographical and demographic) migration from India, state-run agencies are in eight states only.

Over the years, restrictions on the mobility of women have been imposed. In 2002, women below the age of 30 were banned from migrating as domestic workers (DWs) to ECR countries. Despite criticism, the ban was extended to all countries (Kodoth and Varghese 2012). In 2007, the government further restricted women below 30 to migrate as hairdressers, beauticians, dancers, stage artists and labourers (Kumar and Luther 2021).[4] In 2015, the government issued an order that nurses can only be recruited through state-run recruitment agencies and in 2016, it was extended to all women migrating to ECR countries.[5] Recently, private recruiting agents/agencies (RAs[6]) have been allowed to recruit nurses through "Country Specific Orders" and DWs under certain conditions.[7] Women with ECR passports have extremely restricted emigration pathways – requiring prior permission from the government and recruitment through state-run agencies and a few RAs under strict conditionalities.

To accommodate the growing streams of migrants to the UAE, migration infrastructure has developed. However, it is not as robust on the UAE side as the onus for facilitating migration falls on sending countries. The *Kafala* or the sponsorship system plays a critical role in governing different aspects of migrants' economic and social lives and in shaping immigration laws. Every migrant is tied to an Emirati sponsor and the sponsorship contract defines the type of work, employment conditions and duration of residency. Employment visas are typically two or three years long and subject to renewal and are tied to residency permits. Consequently, migrants (with a few rare exceptions) cannot access permanent residency, sociolegal entitlements and citizenship. Two major government institutions, namely, *Tasheel* centres operated through the Ministry of Labour and *Amer* centres under the General Directorate of Residency and Foreign Affairs (GDRFA) form the *regulatory* dimension of the migration infrastructure in the UAE. In response to international criticism on illegal recruitment practices of DWs, the UAE government started *Tadbeer* centres (For more information, see, Malit and Tsourapas 2021).

RAs form the *commercial* pillar of the migration infrastructure in India.[8] Currently, there are over 1,500 active, licensed RAs in India (Map 1). RAs must submit a bank guarantee of INR 5 million as an assurance against malpractices. In 2016, the government reduced the bank guarantee to INR 0.8 million for small-scale recruitments (up to 100 individuals) to increase access in smaller towns and rural areas. To instil greater transparency and efficiencies into migration, both the governments have developed the *technological* aspects of their migration infrastructure. In India, e-migrate was introduced in 2014 to digitally connect RAs, migrants and foreign employers (FEs) to monitor recruitment and deployment.

The UAE has had a similar push towards digitalisation of government services, developed in partnership with the private sector through the *Tasheel* and *Amer* centres.



Map 1. Distribution of Licensed and Active RAs (as on 06.12.2021), State-wise. Source: E-migrate, Government of India

The *humanitarian* dimension represented through non-state actors such as NGOs, labour unions, humanitarian associations, activists/social workers and international organisations have emerged as powerful components of the migration infrastructure. While these are primarily concentrated in India, my research showed an increasing number of humanitarian workers and organisations (both formal and informal) concentrating on migrant-related issues operating in the UAE. Finally, the *social* element of migration infrastructure is deeply entrenched in the India-UAE migratory channels. Women across income categories rely on social networks to learn about migration, source job opportunities and obtain financial and material resources to undertake migration. This is most common in regions that have a historic and dense culture of migration, such as Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

5. Making of gendered migration infrastructure

While migration pathways and their intermediation through regulations, functioning of state and non-state actors, technology and documents are constructed in seemingly gender-neutral ways, they are built upon and affect gender relations. Migration infrastructure differentiates between men, women and notions of genderedness, creating a distinct "gendered migration infrastructure".

Within the Indian context, RAs have withdrawn from the recruitment of women due to strict regulatory regimes. ECR clearances significantly increase the approvals required, increasing RAs' workload. While for men, the ECR process takes between two to seven days, it can take up to one month for women. Additionally, the government has shifted the onus of ensuring safety post-deployment on RAs. In the case of a complaint by a migrant, till the grievance is resolved, the Protector of Emigrants (POE) stops recruitments by suspending the RA's ECR clearances. Inaction and in some cases, inability to resolve the problem, the PGE utilises the INR 5 million bank guarantee of the RA to compensate the migrant. This is seen as a massive financial liability by RAs. Withdrawal from the recruitment of women is particularly acute for DWs working for unverified employers within the private sphere.

Further, legal migration channels can be detrimental to women's mobilities and safety. I found that formal recruitments necessitate longer contractual "bonds". In case women (and men) would like to return to India or change jobs, employers and RAs often tell them, "I have bought you, I have paid … you cannot go" (Coordinator, an Indian Advocacy organisation). Employers demand the repayment of the recruitment costs, making the contractual arrangement into bonded labour in such circumstances.

State-run agencies in India also did not expand the migratory pathways for women. State governments are reticent towards migration, stressing that job opportunities must be created and fulfilled locally and highly patriarchal states do not create a conducive environment for women's migration. Corrupt officials block endeavours to open state agencies, particularly in large sending states and government generated opportunities are allocated to favoured agencies. The bureaucratic functioning of state agencies is another disadvantage. FEs get workers faster and cheaper through RAs and irregular channels. Since state-run agencies are primarily directed towards women, limited capacity coupled with corruption curtails women's migration opportunities.

Limited capacity of state agencies, stringent regulatory pathways and withdrawal of licensed RAs has resulted in gendered migration infrastructure. The gendered migration infrastructure disrupt the five delineated dimensions theorised by Xiang and Lindquist (2014). Subagents form an integral component of women's migration infrastructure, blurring lines between the regulatory, commercial and social dimensions of migration infrastructures. Licensed RAs are concentrated in urban centres (Table 1), removed from

Table 1. Urban/Rural distribution of RAs.

Location	Total	Percentage
Rural	252	16
Urban	1322	84

Source: E-migrate Website and Census 2011, Government of India.

women's everyday realities in smaller towns and rural areas. In a highly patriarchal and stratified country like India, women's mobility is controlled, making access to RAs difficult. The high cost of registering as a RA prohibits expansion to smaller areas while curtailing the benefits of economy of scales in urban conglomerates. Rather than running multiple offices, RAs rely on subagents. Dependence on subagents has increased because of shocks in migration volumes due to recessions, oil prices, increased competition, nationalisation policies and most recently, COVID-19. There are also strong nexuses of subagents that prevent RAs from recruiting from their areas. Subagents understand women's socio-economic conditions. For example, during a visit to a labour camp in Dubai, I came across a large group of widowed, separated and divorced women from Andhra Pradesh recruited by the same subagent. Understanding their vulnerabilities as the sole breadwinner and their limited access to the local labour market (inadequate experience, low wages, restricted opportunities and gender, class, and caste discrimination), the subagent found them to be appropriate for migration.

Subagents help women bypass institutional procedures through "pushing" (Kodoth 2014; Pattadath and Moors 2012). The most common form of pushing is migration through visit visas. While bypassing emigration clearance using visit visas is illegal on the Indian side, entering on a visit visa and converting it to an employment visa is valid in the UAE. Women source visit visas from subagents or kinship and co-ethnic networks in the UAE. Based on interviews, Indian emigration officials question women migrating with visit visas. Women are well-versed with these gendered restrictions and are equipped to answer questions and provide supporting documents. If the sponsor is a close male relative, women make the officer speak to him to reinforce her patriarchal protection overseas.

Due to UAE's fluid visa statuses, it has become a hub for transiting to Gulf countries with more stringent visa rules. Another method is to transit through Sri Lanka and Nepal. As the migratory pathway becomes longer, it also becomes more irregular. Despite strict control over migration, legal statuses remain porous in transnational settings – exiting India illegally does not necessitate that migrants hold a status of irregularity in the UAE and vice versa (Pattadath 2020). For *all* my participants, pushing did not mean victimisation or vulnerability within the gendered migration infrastructure. Therefore, the binary of legal and illegal/irregular fails to capture the complexity of gendered migration infrastructure and women's lives.

Pushing shifts the cost of migration on women creating a large financial burden as entrenched gender norms dictate that women have lower access to financial resources within the household and from formal and informal banking. The majority of participants who migrated through a subagent faced no issues. The subagent provided accurate details and charged INR 33,143 on average.[9] However, two participants interviewed were lied to by their agents, making their position precarious and vulnerable:

> . . . when I came in 2004, I came by an agent paying INR 22,000 . . . I found him near my house. Somebody told me about him. My husband went and paid money . . . one month only I worked. Agent told me I am going for reception job but he gave me a house job. One month, no food, nothing. Eating such big pieces of chicken, we don't have habit. And have to sleep in the kitchen with the dogs . . . I said I can't, I am going back, I cannot. That was very bad. I went [back] but they stamped one year ban on my visa. – Mary, 58 years old, school bus conductor

In extreme circumstances, deception by subagents results in trafficking. A subagent operating out of Punjab revealed that women from Delhi and Mumbai are trafficked to the UAE by unlicensed agents to perform at illegal clubs. Restrictive regulatory regimes can force women migrants to use irregular and hazardous routes while benefitting unlicensed agents, exploitative employers and rent-seeking state agents (Kodoth 2020).

Disruptions to migration infrastructure caused by economic and health crises also force migrants to use irregular channels. The spread of COVID-19 led to arbitrary travel bans imposed by governments due to which the majority of RAs interviewed had not deployed a single worker between March 2020 and September 2021. By July 2020, 50% of RAs were on the verge of shutting down or were unable to make payments (Mitra and Aggarwal 2020). The closure of RAs coupled with new and increased travel requirements, forced migrants to rely on subagents and unlicensed RAs more than before. Simultaneously, the UAE government restricted the issuance of visas to low-income workers. As pathways to migrate legally contracted, the use of visit visas became more common, even by RAs. The positions of migrants became more vulnerable, and women were disproportionately impacted as both migration opportunities and pathways narrowed (detailed in Section 6.3).

6. Socio-spatial ruptures within gendered migration infrastructures

Control on women's mobilities has resulted in state and non-state actors working simultaneously to construct and perpetuate gendered subjects as well as produce incentives to evade and often, flout the law. Hence, gendered migration infrastructure come to life at the intersection of socio-spatial ruptures driven by conservative notions of morality and ethics and the commercialisation of migration pathways. Alongside, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the migration infrastructure which further exacerbated the inequalities in women's mobilities.

6.1. Patriarchal morality and ethics

Patriarchal morality and ethics are deeply entrenched and reproduced by different actors in the migration infrastructure. The Indian government has consistently reinforced its agnostic stance towards international migration of low-income workers to project a strong nationalistic image and women's migration independent of patriarchal protection remains transgressive. Migration of low-income women in particular, is viewed as exploitation by a capitalistic and patriarchal regime, warranting control and regulation to protect women's honour. The conflation of women's mobility with trafficking only partially represents their migration experiences but has stigmatised their mobilities (Wong 2005).

Curtailment of migration of women below matriculation and nurses stems from the perception that women are susceptible to varied forms of exploitation, including and most concerningly, sexual exploitation. However, women in India face discrimination and exploitation in the public and private spheres. Men from marginalised backgrounds are equally susceptible to exploitation abroad, but the restrictions on women's mobilities alone reflects the paternalistic outlook of the Indian state and exercising of state policy in conflict with the needs and aspirations of Indian women. Women's mobilities becomes a tool for national image management which is driven by the projection of nationalistic power and culture. To uphold these principles of power and culture, state-run agencies

and emigration officials as proxies of the government become arbitrators on who migrates and why, giving allowance to some representatives to extend patriarchal protection from the private to the public:

> When the DW is coming, I say don't go. They say, "why, sir? I need to go". I tell them your family, children and husband will have problems if you go. By doing all this, I try to understand the necessity of their migration. Then, I ask about their networks there and take their numbers in case of emergency. The decision to migrate can only be taken based on the situation. – General Manager, Indian state agency

Moreover, restrictions on women below the age of 30 points towards the sexual control of unmarried women. The removal of women from patriarchal protection transgresses the moral and ethical values of a sexually conservative society. Additionally, UAE's family sponsorship laws are also entrenched in cultural politics. For high-income women migrating independently, family sponsorship remains difficult as it fails to comply with socially accepted norms of a heteronormative family and low-income women cannot sponsor their families.

For RAs and their illegal/associational offshoots, the making of gendered migration infrastructure can be traced to the imposition of ethics and morality by the state on RAs along with their own construction of gendered subjects and relations. Women's potential vulnerabilities post-deployment stands oppositional to RAs' own patriarchal values:

> We are very moral ethics family . . . we don't believe in our female working outside . . . female should take care of the family and men should go for work . . . If there is anything [problems], they reverse back from the Indian embassy to us and then we are in a very big situation, it becomes a big mental torture for us because female deployed has undergone maybe physical abuse. Any security for female, we cannot guarantee . . . We are very ethical and we don't believe in this kind of female deployment. Though it is debarring 50% of our women being. At the same time, we are feeling unsecure to do this. – Proprietor, recruitment agency, India

Similarly, the household is a space of contestation with unequal bargaining power and access to resources determined by gendered and generational hierarchies (Silvey 2004), having a profound impact on who migrates, how, when and where. Often, women migrate in defiance to patriarchal norms of male provisioning and household expectations of domesticity and femininity (George 2005; Kodoth 2014; Pattadath and Moors 2012). Women migrating as DWs, waitresses, beauticians and at times as nurses (Walton-Roberts 2012) can be subjected to local gossip and rumours. These occupations bear social stigma and are connotated with provisions of sexual favours and prostitution. Both, women's occupations and mobilities are embedded within a social and cultural milieu dictated by patriarchal morality and ethics. Families, state agencies and RAs are brought into, and they exercise and appropriate these circuits of morality and ethics to determine women's migration, sometimes with women's approval but sometimes without. RAs also involve the family in the recruitment process. Families are briefed about the job role, accommodation, transportation and safety. Sometimes, the family and employer are brought into conversation to clarify questions and doubts. In this manner, RAs fulfil their patriarchal moral and ethical obligations while ensuring that their businesses does not face problems on account of families and the government post-deployment.

6.2. Profit-making and economic viability

Gendered migration infrastructures make the profit maximisation and economic viability of the majority of RAs tenuous. Corruption has been difficult to tackle given complicity of state agents and resource and capacity deficiencies. Bribing allows agencies with large net worth to access government services better and quicker. RAs also gain clients through lavish hospitality, bribes and sharing of commission. In a regulatory landscape that is rife with corruption and is moved by networking of large firms, smaller and law-abiding RAs are pushed out. Additionally, migrants do not complain about the high service fees charged as it puts their migration in jeopardy, can endanger themselves and their families due to the muscle power of local agents and as local law enforcement is often complicit. These regulatory failures perpetuate a vicious cycle wherein illegal practices and subagents proliferate at the expense of others and can perpetuate ruptures within the migration infrastructure as experienced by a RA:

> I opened my first centre in Rajasthan where we trained for marble . . . the subagent used to charge INR 70–80,000 from the candidates. We started doing the same between 40 to 45,000. We used to bring the candidate in our premises, upskill, re-train [and] issue the certification, and the costing came down very, very heavily. So, the candidate started getting in touch with us directly. This started upsetting the existing system. People started threatening me, "If you do this, it will be very difficult for you to survive". – Proprietor, recruitment agency, India

The cost of regulatory failures is passed on to migrants as poor quality of services, restrictive migration opportunities and high service charges. For legally operating RAs, it constrains their expansion to newer areas as per emerging trends and limits their ability to earn higher profits by increasing volumes.

While regulatory oversight through digital technologies has been beneficial by reducing illegal recruitment practices, the unintended consequence has been increased vulnerability of RAs within the regulatory regime leading to their withdrawal from the recruitment of women. Since RAs are financially penalised by appropriating their bank guarantee or suspension of their emigration requests, many have limited their dealings to large, verified clients. Conforming to labour market trends, low-income men find employment in more organised sectors such as construction, oil and gas, and manufacturing whereas low-income women are employed in more informal occupations. Therefore, due to the large financial burden because of increased regulatory measures and accountability, the recruitment of men is less risky.

The particularities of women's migration makes their recruitment and deployment less profitable in comparison to men. The ECR process for women is cumbersome and time consuming. The restrictive age criteria and women migrants' concentration in particular migrant-sending districts also increases the time and effort required to search for candidates. The comfortable conversion from a visit to an employment visa makes it easy and at times, less costly for women to bypass emigration procedures. As profit driven businesses, longer operational procedures, fragmented nature of women's recruitment and alternative migratory pathways do not allow RAs to minimise operational costs while maximising profits.

To optimise the time and costs of recruitment, RAs prefer to hire in bulk. Table 2 shows ECR clearances for the top 25 professions to the UAE in 2019 and aligns with sectors that undertake mass recruitments – construction, oil and gas, facility management, hospitality and healthcare. Within these top roles, women migrated either as cleaners, housemaids or

Table 2. Top 25 roles for UAE in 2019.

Role	EC Count
Mason	12,223
Worker	11,194
Carpenter	9,200
Cleaner	6,127
Fitter	5,742
Labour	5,720
Electrician	5,042
Welder	3,291
Painter	2,928
Steel fixer	2,592
Technician	2,093
Operator	1,907
Plumber	1,245
Mechanic	997
Scaffolder	761
Salesman	734
Cook for hotels	510
Fabricator	367
Waiter	362
Rigger	359
Housemaid	285
Tailor	242
Steel door maker	163
Goldsmith	145
Registered nurse (BSc)	139

nurses. However, in 2019, as per e-migrate records, only 139 nurses and 229 women engaged in "other professions" were granted ECR clearance to the UAE. Therefore, even in the healthcare industry which can offer benefits of mass recruitment, RAs are involved minimally.

From India to GCC: Examining the Role of Foreign Employers in the Migration Cycle. India Centre for Migration (ICM).

Other than healthcare, domestic work and teaching are feminised sectors in which Indian women are in high demand. For DWs, consolidating demands from individual clients, vetting them, finding candidates, getting ECR clearances and following-up post-deployment is economically burdensome. Similarly, despite the high demand for teachers, they are not recruited by RAs as hiring requirements are fragmented and small. I found that school managements prefer hiring women on family visas (rather than RAs) as they do not have to bear the costs of visas and accommodation. Besides these sectors, women are also occupied in hospitality and cleaning. However, these are not gender-segregated and are not dominated by Indians. Therefore, mass recruitment of women and stability of volumes are limited due to the gendered and racialised nature of labour markets and particularities of women's employment relations.

6.3. COVID-19 ruptures

While the socio-spatial ruptures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to migratory pathways have eased, the (im)mobilities within the India-UAE corridor from March 2020 to early 2022 provide insights into responses within and to the different dimensions of the migration infrastructure in times of crises.

Migrants in the UAE faced wage cuts, forced leaves without pay and arbitrary terminations (Rajan and Akhil 2021). In response, the Indian government carried out the largest repatriation exercise called Vande Bharat. By August 2020, almost 1 in 5 Indians in the UAE was seeking repatriation or had already left the country (Hilton 2020). Despite the dire situation of those repatriated, migrants had to bear the cost of tickets, multiple RT-PCR tests and institutional quarantine – prohibitive costs for many. In fact, wage theft was a significant concern, making it extremely difficult for migrants to absorb the costs of travel. Alongside state actors, NGOs and activists on both sides of the transnational field played a significant role. I found that none of the initiatives had a gender imputes. Women across income categories but particularly those employed in informal, low-income occupations lost jobs in large numbers (Piper and Foley 2020; UN Women 2021). However, women returning through repatriation flights especially in the beginning were limited. Therefore, women stranded overseas were left in vulnerable and precarious positions.

In response to the pandemic, migration infrastructures became highly fractured, plagued by experimental, last minute and poorly communicated border closures, travel bans, COVID-19 testing requirements and entry procedures. However, my research showed that these were highly classed and racialised, thus severely impacting low-income migrants from the Global South. For example, with the catastrophic COVID-19 spread during the second wave in India, in April 2021, the UAE imposed a ban on travel from India. While the ban was to be for 10 days, it was extended 5–7 times, with little or no notice for over three months. Airlines would accept bookings but cancel last minute. Many stuck in India lost their jobs or were forced to take unpaid leaves. Those in dire need to return transited through a third country primarily, Qatar, Maldives, Armenia and Ukraine for 14 days. Organised by travel agents, these routes were expensive and risky. Once travel restrictions were lifted in August 2021, travellers from India were required to take four RT-PCR tests – 72 hours (changed to 48 hours in December) before departure, six hours before at the airport, on landing and within 5 days of arrival. Multiple tests significantly increased the cost of travel. Due to limited testing infrastructures at Indian airports, long queues of agitated passengers were common, especially for those unable to book appointments and make online payments.

Further, employment visas for low-income workers remained restricted, forcing workers to travel on visit visas, adding to their burden of expenses and risks. Those returning on employment visas had to take prior approval from the UAE government. These approvals were arbitrary and discretionary. My fieldwork showed that high-income individuals got immediate approvals. However, middle- and low-income migrants did not receive approval for months on end. This forced migrants to approach RAs and subagents for required approvals or circumvent regulatory procedures. The gap between "movers" and "non-movers" had widened (Benton et al. 2021) – migrants that could absorb the extra pandemic-related travel costs and had high digital literacy remained mobile. For others, migration remained uncertain and expensive, further incentivising irregular movement and increasing dependency on both, formal and informal recruitment and travel agents. However, these travel restrictions, testing requirements and entry procedures did not apply to migrants from severely impacted countries in the Global North (such as, Italy, Germany and the US). These classed and racialised disparities in (im)mobilities became more acute as vaccine inequalities grew during the course of the pandemic.

Similar to the regulations imposed on Indian migrant women described previously, regulatory response to migration during to the COVID-19 pandemic reiterates that enhanced state power over mobilities can restrict rights of migrants and exacerbate inequalities along the axes of gender, class and race. The stigmatisation of categories of migrants and marking bodies as dangerous resulted in limited migration opportunities for low-income workers and creation of unsafe migratory pathways. Further, the possible institutionalisation of technologically mediated migration infrastructure in the future has the potential to disadvantage low-income workers. Within these, women will be further marginalised due to their limited access to digital infrastructures.

7. Conclusion

Focusing on the particularities of women's migration, the failures and interruptions within the migration infrastructure became apparent, leading to its reconceptualisation into gendered migration infrastructure. Increased intermediation of migration pathways has resulted in the withdrawal of RAs from the recruitment and deployment of women. Alongside, limited capacity of state agencies has led to the creation of differentiated migratory pathways for women, marked by informality and uncertainties. Indian women increasingly migrate through subagents and visit visas. The gendered migration infrastructure created lies at the intersection of patriarchal morality and ethics, the economic motivations that are central to the businesses of RAs and socio-spatial ruptures such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recessions and infectious disease outbreaks in the past and future. Gendered migration infrastructure makes women's migration more precarious and also, constrain their economic opportunities.

In the coming years, migration infrastructure is likely to undergo major transformations, simultaneously becoming more intensive and extensive (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Greater digitalisation will lead to more regulatory oversight and compliance procedures. The growth of skilling agencies and their increased role in the recruitment and deployment of workers can make migration pathways more intensified as well. On the contrary, changes in migration laws and labour market demands can make migration more expansive. The removal of ECR and ECNR categorisation with the new Emigration Bill could mark a shift in migration management in India. Further, as per projections, even if limited new jobs are created in the traditional sectors in the UAE, replacement demands will continue and demand in healthcare and domestic work are expected to grow as medical infrastructure expands and as more women (both local and migrant) join formal employment. UAE's push towards a knowledge-based economy has increased the demand for skilled workers including Indian women and this is anticipated to grow. The Indian government is also identifying new destination countries to expand migratory pathways for Indian workers. In these new circuits of mobilities, state governments in partnership with RAs and skilling agencies are emerging as prominent stakeholders. Thus, migration infrastructure is constantly in flux and will need to innovate in the coming years to capture emergent trends and manage migration pathways.

Notes

1. I used the income thresholds of visa categories to create the income brackets. To qualify for family reunification, migrants must earn a minimum of AED 4,000 or 3,000 plus accommodation per month. Therefore, this was the cutoff for the low-income category. For the middle-income category, I took the family sponsorship rules for women as the criteria. A woman earning AED 8,000 plus accommodation or AED 10,000 per month can sponsor their family. However, I found that most women in this category did not receive accommodation and therefore, due to the additional accommodation costs I kept AED 15,000 as the cut-off. This was supported by my fieldwork data. All respondents earning over AED 15,000 per month were categorised as high-income.
2. Those below matriculation but over 50 years of age, have completed three years overseas or are tax assessed have ECNR passports.
3. Afghanistan, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iraq (restricted emigration for all), Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Thailand, UAE, and Yemen.
4. Order No.OI-11016/33/2007-EP/Emig. Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Government of India (2007).
5. Order NoZ-11025/126/2015-Emig(Part File). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2016).
6. Licensed RAs in India have requested a change in nomenclature to Human Resource Agents (HRAs) because they believe that cases of recruitment frauds and exploitation of vulnerable migrants have tarnished the reputation of the recruitment industry. It is claimed that due to this poor perception, RAs are often equated with *dalals* or pimps in India. However, official communications and government documents still refer to private, licensed agents as RAs, and therefore, I have used this nomenclature in the paper.
7. For example, Order no. Z-11025/43/2020-OE-II. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2020). While this presents a big business opportunity for Indian RAs due to the significant demand for domestic workers in ECR countries, several RAs interviewed remain skeptical due to strict conditionalities, particularly accountability post-deployment.
8. Given the gendered focus of the research, I endeavoured to find and interview women RAs and subagents. While through literature and anecdotally I am aware of the presence of women RAs and subagents, they were difficult to locate through fieldwork. The websites of most RAs interviewed showed a male-dominated top management. Emails to women RAs for interviews remain unanswered.
9. This is the average of the two research periods. The minimum amount paid was INR 5,000, but the maximum amount was as high as INR 1,60,000.

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