



## Migrant workers in the GCC Countries: A study of socio-economic conditions

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### Abstract

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon that has been happening since the dawn of human history. The main reasons for migration are economic and political in nature. This could also be understood in terms of push and pull factors. When people migrate to another place due to an adverse situation that compels them is called a push factor. On the other hand, when people are attracted to get better opportunities elsewhere is called a pull factor. Gulf countries are among the most important destinations where a large number of migrants live. They have come to the GCC countries from several countries, especially from South Asian countries. It is estimated that about 20 million migrants are living in the GCC countries. Of them, approximately nine million Indians are living in the region. The working and living conditions of migrant workers are said to be poor. Their rights are often violated. It is also reported that their salaries are not paid on time. It is sometimes not paid by employers. The main aim of the paper is to examine all these issues deeply. This study would be largely based on secondary sources of literature available. The six GCC countries, namely, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE, have been taken into consideration. The paper also tries to assess how adversely the socio-economic life of the migrant works.

**Keywords:** Migrant workers, GCC Countries, socio-economic effects

### Introduction

The movement of a people or a person from one place to another place is known as migration. It could be from one region to another region and from one country to another country. In contemporary times, the main reasons behind human mobility are social, economic, and natural factors [1]. Some migrations could be voluntary, whereas some are forced ones. According to the International Migrant Stock 2019 report from the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, India has about 17.5 million migrants. This makes India one of the top international providers of human mobility. About 6.4% of the people who move around the world are from India. The United Nations Migration Agency, which is an international organisation for migrants, says that human migration occurs when a person moves from one international border to another or from one country to another. Regardless of a person's legal status, whether they moved voluntarily or they were forced to move. In terms of internal migration, moving from one state to another state Indian constitution provides flexible rights to its citizens. Article 19 of the Indian Constitution says that every Indian citizen is free to move anywhere inside India's borders. According to the 2011

census, about 45 million Indians left the place where they were born to make money and live a better life elsewhere [2]. The social aspect of migration, in these conditions, people have chosen the process of migration because they want to lock in a higher quality of life, including a better quality of education and better health facilities, and so on. Another aspect of migration is economic. Under this aspect, many individuals are opting for the process of migration to improve their chances of securing a job. It is also possible that people will choose to migrate because they are unable to find better work opportunities in their own country. In contemporary times, these are the primary factors that lead people to choose the process of migration.

### Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries

Following the oil boom of the 1970s, huge populations from the GCC regions migrated to Gulf countries in search of employment. During this time, Gulf countries mostly hired workers from India or the southern part of Asia. The main reason behind this is that most of the workers from these regions are South Asian workers, who were willing to work for low wages and did not get involved in the internal politics of the Gulf countries.

**Table 1:** Global Distribution of Migrants Workers

Region / Category	Indicator (2017 Estimates)	Source (released in 2018)
Total migrant workers worldwide	164 million	ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers (2018)
Migrant workers in high-income countries	111.2 million (67.9%)	ILO Report, 2018
Migrant workers in upper-middle-income countries	30.5 million (18.6%)	ILO Report, 2018
Migrant workers in lower-middle-income countries	16.6 million (10.1%)	ILO Report, 2018
Migrant workers in low-income countries	5.6 million (3.4%)	ILO Report, 2018
Arab States (Middle East) share of global migrant workers	13.9% (~22.8 million)	ILO Report, 2018

Source: ILO Reports on Migrant Workers, 2018

According to the table above, at the end of 2017, 164 million migrants were working worldwide, with 111 million of them in high-income countries (67.9% of the total). Most of these workers are attracted to developed nations due to higher wages, better working conditions, and greater job availability compared to what they would find in a developing country. Notably, 22.8 million migrants (13.9% of the total) reside in the Middle East (Arab states); thus, the Middle East (West Asia) is a key region for migrant labour. Arab states and Gulf

countries heavily rely on foreign migrant workers to fill roles in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and various service industries. When compared to the total number of migrant workers (164 million), relatively few are found in lower-middle-income (10.1%), low-income (3.4%), and upper-middle-income (18.6%) countries. Therefore, although migration occurs globally, the Middle East exhibits a remarkable dependence on migrant workers, who are a vital part of its workforce and economy.

**Table 2:** South Asian Migrant Workers in Major Gulf Countries

South Asian Countries	Kuwait	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Year
India	732,000	545,000	2,800,000	1,700,000	2014
Pakistan	120,000	90,000	1,500,000	1,200,000	2014
Bangladesh	180,000	137,000	500,000	900,000	2014
Nepal	42,000	341,000	500,000	250,000	2014
Sri Lanka	7,627	109,860	550,000	300,000	2012-2016

**Source:** ILO Report, 2014 and GLMM Reports

The table demonstrates that many South Asian migrant workers are distributed across various countries in the GCC region, indicating that this region remains one of the leading global destinations for labour migration. India has the largest concentration of categories of workers present in each of the listed GCC countries; it is especially prominent in Saudi Arabia (2.8 million) and the UAE (1.7 million), reflecting India’s longstanding labour linkage to the region and a very large commitment nationally to moving its workforce to the region. Pakistan has a large population of migrants working, with 1.5 million in Saudi Arabia and 1.2 million in the UAE, indicating both countries’ significant reliance on Pakistan’s migrant workforce to find employment and send remittances home. Bangladesh has a high migrant worker population number with 900,000 migrants in the UAE and 500,000 migrants in Saudi Arabia, showing that the region has been an important destination for Bangladeshi male workers for construction and low-skilled job sectors. One interesting note is that Nepal has an extraordinarily high percentage of migrant workers in Qatar (341,000) compared with both Kuwait (42,000) and the UAE (250,000); this suggests that Nepal was a major source country of migrant workers when Qatar dramatically increased the number of major infrastructure projects throughout the 2010’s. Although fewer migrant workers came from Sri Lanka, they did send a considerable number of migrant workers to both Saudi Arabia (550,000) and UAE (300,000); there were comparatively far fewer Sri Lankan migrants in Kuwait (7,627) and Qatar (109,860)—this suggests to us that there may be some fluctuation and/or changes to the pattern of migration throughout the different stages of time from 2012–2016.

Migrant workers from South Asian Countries in nature unskilled workers, constituted the backbone of the Gulf construction industry’s growth. Although the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) considers migrants to be temporary, some have been living there for years, and their third generation will be labourers in the GCC. Approximately 70% of Indian migrants work as drivers, domestic helpers, or labourers on building sites. If we look at migration patterns, we can see that the majority of migrants came from Kerala in the past, but currently, low-skilled labourers are migrating from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana are the states from which a substantial volume of labour migration occurs.

The patterns of migration towards GCC Countries have mostly ‘contract’ workers, also known as blue collar job. In GCC Countries migrant workers do not have the right to get permanent citizenship. However, migrant workers get permanent citizenship in European countries as well as in the United States [3]. There are some important reasons behind choosing GCC Countries as a destination country for migrant workers. Two of them are major reasons for the migration towards GCC Countries. The reasons are given below:

- Economic Effects
- Social Effects

**Economic Effects:** After the oil boom in the region, many development projects and oil industries were established in the GCC region, which demanded a bunch of skilled and unskilled labourers for the production, construction, and many other works. These demands were the main cause of heavy migration of contract workers; those who could not find an appropriate opportunity of employment in their origin nation opted to migrate to GCC Countries. This type of migration is the cause of financial upliftment.

Labour migration from one country to another country play very vital role in reducing unemployment in the origin of migrant workers. It also helps the economic growth of both countries (the labour sending country and the labour receiving country). The labour sending country is getting remittances instead of its labour force, and the labour receiving country is getting the skilled labour and speeding up production with the help of the migrant labour force.

**Social Effects:** Migration towards the Gulf region has also brought social benefits to the families of migrant workers and their dependents. The impact of this benefit can be seen in many sectors such as education, living standards, and the health sector. It also helps to eradicate poverty among migrant workers and their families, and help to live with a better social status in society.

The common practice in all GCC regions is that migrant workers, who came from Western countries, are facing fewer problems than those who came from South Asian, African and other countries other than Europeans countries. A similar situation for Nationals worker and they enjoy all basic rights which is related to workers. The salary of migrant workers who belong to countries other than western country is comparatively less than that of national workers, and less than that of migrant workers of western country.

**Table 3: Indian Migrant Workers in the Major Gulf Countries**

Destination	Estimated Indian Migrants in 2017	Summary
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	3.31 million	The most populous country of Indian immigrants living in the Arabian Gulf (2017).
Saudi Arabia	2.27 million	The predominant place where Indians migrate to provide labour for the Gulf region's economies.
Oman	1.20 million	Includes some totals from the Gulf's entire Indian migrant labour population.
Kuwait	1.16 million	A significant population of Indians in the Gulf region, especially as labourers.
Other Gulf States (Qatar, Bahrain)	1.0 million	Total population of Indians living in the Gulf in 2017
Total in Gulf / West Asia	8.9 million combined	The population of Qatar and Bahrain combined (which represents part of the total for the Gulf).

Source: United Nations *International Migration Report 2017*

In 2017, there were around 8.9 million total Indian migrant workers living and working in the Gulf area (also known as West Asia), thus making the Gulf area one of India's largest overseas labour markets. The UAE (with approximately 3.31 million Indian migrants) is the largest destination for Indian migration due to a high demand for workers (from across construction, services, trade and domestic sectors) and a long-established Indian diaspora network. The second-largest destination for Indian migrant workers is Saudi Arabia (2.27 million), which underscores Saudi Arabia's historic dependence on foreign labour as a means of maintaining its economy, along with its large-scale and expansive infrastructure and service sectors. A noteworthy aspect of the data is that there are significant numbers of Indians living and working in much smaller Gulf countries, including Oman (1.20 million) and Kuwait (1.16 million); thus, Indian migrants are present throughout the entire Gulf labour market, regardless of country size or economic strength. The other Gulf States (i.e., Qatar & the Bahraini Kingdom), with 1 million, are just another example of how Indian workers are largely dispersed over many countries in this area, but not limited to 1 or 2 countries. From the evidence presented in the table below, the region known as West Asia represents a primary migration corridor for India, with Indian migrants comprising a significant part of the labour force (and providing large amounts of remittances), as well as contributing to the economies of the Gulf States, and they also develop people-to-people linkages between India and the Gulf States.

**Table 4: Average Salary of Blue-Collar Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries**

Gulf Countries	Average Salary of Migrants In US\$
Qatar	US\$464
Kuwait	US\$432
Bahrain	US\$323
Oman	US\$270
Saudi Arabia	US\$221

Source: Abdoulay Diop, KienTrung Le, and Michael C.Ewers, *India Migration Report 2016* (Routledge) Edited by S.IrudayaRajan. P, 78

This data represents the all-foreign labour force in GCC Countries, but mostly focuses on South Asian migrant workers. Most of them are unskilled worker and some are semi-skilled worker those are working in construction, mining, sanitation, manufacturing, custodial work, oil field work, mechanic, maintenance, warehousing, firefighting, water in the cafeteria, etc <sup>[4]</sup>.

Table 1 demonstrate that how the Saudi Arabian authority and the sponsor (kafeel) of migrant workers pay minimum wage compared to other Gulf countries. Here, this data revealed that only the monthly salary that is earned by migrants' workers did not include the other allowances, such as transportation cost, accommodation allowance, electricity bill, water bill, which are generally given by the employers to employees <sup>[5]</sup>.

**Table 5: Percentage of Social Beneficiaries of migrant workers in Gulf countries**

Name of benefits	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Bahrain	Oman	Qatar	Average
Food allowance	10	35	11	78	22	31
Health insurance	52	79	22	77	21	50
Accident insurance	3	16	17	75	10	24
Free water and electricity	45	60	72	82	51	62
No benefit	4	5	12	13	21	11
Housing allowance	64	0	42	75	37	44

Source: Abdoulay Diop, KienTrung Le, and Michael C.Ewers, *India Migration Report 2016* (Routledge) Edited by S.IrudayaRajan. P, 79

**Table 5: Percentage of Economic Beneficiaries of Migrant workers in GCC countries**

Name of benefit	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Bahrain	Oman	Qatar	Average
Paid holiday	24	29	63	77	41	47
Transport to/from work	55	49	62	72	51	58
Access to training	2	3	1	25	0	6
Paid sick leave	31	35	73	77	21	47
Other benefit	1	0	0	0	12	3

Source: Abdoulay Diop, KienTrung Le, and Michael C.Ewers, *India Migration Report 2016* (Routledge) Edited by S.IrudayaRajan. P, 79

Tables 4 and 5 display how the Gulf countries provide some other benefit which is basic requirement of migrant workers. Despite the salary they are receiving, some other benefits such as housing allowance, health insurance, paid holiday, food allowance, free water and electricity, paid sick leave, access to training, and also some other benefits.

**Housing Allowance:** In Saudi Arabia, most of the governmental organisations and kafeel provide housing for accommodation to migrant worker instead, they directly cut the amount of accommodation from their salary. In addition to their salary, about 44 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of housing allowance in the GCC region, except in the UAE. In Oman highest number of migrant workers, 75 per cent, are the beneficiaries of housing allowance, 37 per cent of migrant workers received housing allowance in Qatar, and Bahrain provide the housing allowance to 42 per cent of migrant workers. In Kuwait, the second-highest number of migrant workers, 64 per cent, are the beneficiaries of housing allowance, and Saudi Arabia provides 0 per cent housing allowance to migrant workers.

**Food Allowance:** Despite their salary, about 31 percent migrant workers are the beneficiaries of food allowances. Saudi Arabia provides food allowance to 35 per cent of migrant workers; Qatar, 22 per cent, Kuwait, 10 per cent, Oman, 78 per cent, and Bahrain, 11 per cent. These findings indicate that the majority of migrant workers in the GCC region, especially in Saudi Arabia, have to sacrifice a portion of their wages for drink and food expenses <sup>[6]</sup>.

**Transportation Allowance:** In the GCC region, except in the UAE, 58 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of transportation allowance. Out of it, 72 per cent of migrant workers in Oman, 62 per cent in Bahrain, 49 per cent in Saudi Arabia, 55 per cent in Kuwait, and 51 per cent of migrant workers in Qatar are the beneficiaries of travel allowances. These data indicate that more than 50 per cent of migrant workers must spend their salary on transportation services.

**Paid Leave, Sick Leave, and Annual Leave:** The majority of migrant workers get their annual leave only after rendering services for at least two years in their host countries. In the GCC region, except the UAE, 47 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of paid leave and sick leave. Out of 47 per cent, 77 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of paid and sick leave in Oman. In Saudi Arabia, 29 per cent of migrant workers is the beneficiaries of paid leave, and 35 per cent of migrant worker is the beneficiaries of paid sick leave. That finding indicates the majority of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are not getting paid sick leave, which is an indicator of human rights violations. Kuwait provides paid sick leave to 31 per cent of migrant workers and paid leave to 24 per cent of migrant workers. In Bahrain, the beneficiary of paid sick leave is 73 per cent of migrant workers and beneficiary of paid sick leave, and 72 per cent of migrant workers. In Qatar, 41 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of paid leave, and 21 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of paid sick leave <sup>[7]</sup>.

**Health insurance and Accidental insurance:** The data also provides information regarding the health insurance of migrant workers, and related to the accidental insurance of migrant workers, which is given by the employers to

employees. In the GCC region, except for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, all GCC countries provide health insurance to 79 per cent of migrant workers, and 16 per cent of migrant workers are beneficiaries of accidental insurance. In Kuwait, the number of migrant workers who are getting the benefit of health insurance is 52 per cent and 3 per cent of migrant workers are the beneficiaries of accidental insurance. 22 per cent of migrant workers are getting the benefit of health insurance in Bahrain, and 17 per cent of migrant workers in Bahrain are getting accidental insurance. In Qatar, 21 per cent of migrant workers are beneficiaries of health insurance, and 10 per cent of migrant workers are beneficiaries of accidental insurance. 77 per cent of migrant workers in Oman are getting the benefit of health insurance, and 75 per cent of migrant workers are getting the benefit of accidental insurance.

**Despite all the allowances, some migrant workers are not getting any kind of benefits.**

In the GCC region, except the UAE, 11 per cent of migrant workers do not get any kind of benefits. Out of 11 per cent in Bahrain, 12 per cent of migrant workers are not beneficiaries of any kind of benefits, in Saudi Arabia, 5 per cent, in Kuwait, 4 per cent, in Oman, 13 per cent, in Qatar, 21 per cent of migrant workers are not getting any single benefits except their monthly salary.

**Source of data:** This data was collected by Abdoulay Diop, Kien Trung Le, and Michael C. Ewers in the GCC region. The researcher surveyed the labour camp in the GCC region and interviewed 709 migrant workers in Kuwait, 702 migrant workers from Saudi Arabia, 701 from Bahrain, 707 from Oman, and 847 from Qatar. In a labour camp researcher randomly select migrant workers for interview, those who are 18 years old and who lived in labour camps during the survey period in the GCC region.

**Notes:** United Arab Emirates was not included in this survey because the researcher was not obtained administrative permission to conduct the field survey.

This study also highlights some other issues of migrant workers which are related to the living and working conditions of migrant workers such as forced labour, the kafala system (sponsorship problem), Working hour, and denial of freedom of association. and many other issues which are contribute to human rights violation of migrant workers is unnoticed and these issues are not reported by migrant workers due to some conditional reason.

**Forced labour:** According to the Forced Labour Convention 1930 of the ILO, Article 2 of the ILO forced labour convention defines the category of forced labour: "forced or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily <sup>[8]</sup>." In some conditions, the term forced or compulsory labour shall not include the condition of forced labour as stated in the ILO Forced Labour Convention 1930, article no. 2 <sup>[9]</sup>. Human right watch is an international non-governmental organisation (HRW) that conducts research and advocacy on human rights. The organisation always highlights the human rights issues of migrant workers in West Asian countries. The HRW recently interviewed 36 people who are domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, whose situation clearly shows the condition of forced labour <sup>[10]</sup>.

**Kafala System (Sponsorship System):** Under the kafala system, Gulf countries, national governmental company or private company hired the large number of work force that work force known as migrant workers. Under the kafala system kafeel (contractor) has the full authority over migrant workers. The migrant worker also fully depends on kafeel for economic and legal needs. Here, economic needs refer to the wages of workers and other allowances such as housing, transportation, food and drink, and many other benefits provided by the kafeel to the migrant workers, and legal needs refer to the identity documentation issue, such as a work permit in the country known as (Iqama) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Most of the migrant workers come in Gulf countries on a two-year contract period. During the contract period, migrant workers cannot change their own job, and also, they cannot leave the country before the contract period. For domestic migrant workers, it is obligatory to stay in the house of the kafeel, especially for women and girl migrant workers. In that situation, women and girl domestic migrant workers are facing the problem of human rights violations and are also victims of forced labour. ILO Convention number 189, 2011, related to the domestic migrant workers, under this convention Article 5 provides special rights which are “Each Member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence <sup>[12]</sup>.”

**Working hour:** ILO convention number 189, 2011, related to the domestic migrant workers, under this convention, Article 10 provides some basic criteria of working hour which are as follows.

- “Each Member shall take measures towards ensuring equal treatment between domestic workers and workers generally in relation to normal hours of work, overtime compensation, periods of daily and weekly rest and paid annual leave in accordance with national laws, regulations or collective agreements, taking into account the special characteristics of domestic work”.
- “Weekly rest shall be at least 24 consecutive hours”.
- “Periods during which domestic workers are not free to dispose of their time as they please and remain at the disposal of the household to respond to possible calls shall be regarded as hours of work to the extent determined by national laws, regulations or collective agreements, or any other means consistent with national practice” <sup>[13]</sup>.

According to many migrant workers, it is very common to work extra hours without any overtime wage, and they will not have a weekly holiday. According to national and international convention they have the right of weekly holiday of at least 24 hours, but some workers work 18 long hour including Friday, which is a national holiday in the country.

**Denial of freedom of association:** “In December 2006, the ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) adopted an Action Plan on Migrant Workers which focuses on four priorities: protection of rights, unionisation, sustainable development and awareness raising <sup>[14]</sup>.” According to ITUC, one of the best ways to check exploitation of migrant workers is to provide the trade union and the right to join a trade union. According to the latest ITUC annual survey, most of the migrant workers in the GCC region remain in a vulnerable situation just because of the absence of trade union rights of migrant workers. In the Gulf region, except Kuwait, none of

the countries ratified the ILO Convention No. 87 and ILO convention number 98, which are related to the “Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, Convention 1948 (ILO c-087)”, “ILO Convention 98 Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention 1949.” These two conventions provide the basic rights to migrant workers. Saudi Arabia is not signatories of both conventions.

## Conclusion

Apart from the above-discussed issues like lack of access of effective legal system, lack of access to good food and drink and several issues which could be numerous, but here mainly through this article, I would be dealing further only with the prominent issues discussed above. In my analysis, I found that the basic rights of migrant workers have been violated in many forms. For example, many migrant workers are forcefully exploited in different public and private sectors, which fosters forced labour practices. In order to compare with inhabitant and migrant workers, I found that migrant workers are facing disparities with different employers. They got least salaries compared to national and workers from Western countries. This finding shows that GCC countries failed to protect the guidelines given by the International Labour Organisation.

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