

# Negotiating the Intimate Space Home and Sense of Belonging Among Migrant Women Domestic Workers

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*Women migrants from Kerala to the Gulf countries are embedded in a complex network. On the one hand the state imposes restrictions on their migration ostensibly to protect their interests, on the other it denies young women the opportunity to earn a livelihood. The manner in which the state differentiates on the basis of work is seen by the differential treatment of nurses and domestic workers. This essay, drawing from extensive field work focuses on the difficult situation of migrant domestic workers who negotiate a complex terrain of reconstituting temporarily the notion of 'home' in their employment even while longing for their own homes..*

The demand for women migrant domestic workers has increased in the last few decades with the change in the globalised market. Along with other South Asian countries, India has emerged as one of the strong labour sending countries. This visibility of women across the border has prompted both India and the UAE to evolve regulations on the labour mobility of women. For example, in India, migrant women domestic workers below the age of 30 are banned from emigrating for work.

This ban on emigration of women 'unskilled' workers, particularly domestic workers is framed as a measure to protect 'vulnerable' women crossing borders. This ban is a 'symbolic regulation' that presents a concerned Indian and Emirati public with impression that the state is acting and taking their concerns seriously. Defining migrant domestic workers as powerless victims of their Arab employers or of unscrupulous men who try to traffic them into sex trade label these women as a category 'at risk'. As a result, rumours and doubts about the sexual morality of migrant domestic workers circulate more widely and become cemented in the ways in which they are perceived, also in their own social circle (Pattadath and Moors 2012).

Domestic workers as transnational migrants bring the debate on transnationalism from below, mobility and the relationship with the nation-state ((Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich 2002; Moors 2003; de Regt 2006). Compared to other kinds of transnational migrants, women migrant domestic workers' mobility is highly restricted at the site of their

employment. As we know a large majority of migrant domestic workers are women and it has resulted in feminisation of transnational migration. Growing economic inequalities in a global scale, shift in family pattern and relationship, evaluation of women's employment and unpaid domestic labour, etc. has drawn more women in the paid domestic sector. Over the years women's transnational migration as domestic workers has significantly increased. For instance, from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Philippines, the proportion of women international migrants has increased from 15 per cent in the 1970s to 60-80 per cent in the 1990s.

Kerala women's migration to Persian Gulf is assumed to be connected to the long historical link between the coast of Kerala to that of the many Persian Gulf countries including the United Arab Emirates. This essay attempts to understand the concept of home and the sense of belonging in the lives of migrant women domestic workers who have travelled from Kerala to Dubai as domestic workers. The essay is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among migrant women domestic workers who have travelled from Kerala to United Arab Emirates. Fieldwork for this research was conducted in Dubai and Sharjah (two prominent emirates in UAE) and in Kerala during the year 2007 and 2008<sup>1</sup>.

In the course of their multiple migrations, the notion of 'home' travels along and it produces multiple meaning in many of these locations. Various relationships and sentiments are produced, altered and reproduced within it and it also produces different il/licit and legal discourses as women as migrant domestic workers. This chapter is built based on three acts related to 'home- leaving, engaging and making 'home' at various points of their labour trajectory'. The attempt here is to bring out the ways in which home gets reconfigured in the lives of women domestic workers.

## **Background**

Normative gendered perception about women who leave their families and children back home as women who do not fit into the socially accepted gendered role evokes a sense of illicitness around their work. This production of illicitness which is termed here as a 'moral panic', is created by this dominant perception. This moral panic is produced through the construction and imagination of unsafe and dangerous 'other'. Here women's safety is determined by the boundary of the home and often this is defined and maintained by the sentiments produced around home. At times this boundary of home extends to an imagined boundary of nation-state. Then the sentiments of home translate into nationalistic sentiments.

The differentiating boundary between workplace and private domain becomes very thin and almost absent in the case of many women domestic workers; and especially in the case of live-in domestic workers it is almost absent. Domestic work is usually considered an extension of other routine gendered housework and much of this housework is entangled

with emotions, sentiments and intimacies. Domesticity is re-articulated and re-shaped when women domestic workers engage with a new family within this worksite/home sphere. Women domestic workers based on their particular social and cultural location do not fit into the dominant gendered assumptions about domesticity. This hierarchical domesticity performed by women domestic workers comes into conflict with the dominant domesticity of their female employers. This is more so when the employers also belong to the similar racial and regional background. Hence women have to deal with various complexities of this diverse and multiple domesticities of their worksite, sometimes by integrating into it and sometimes by refuting it. As Gamburd points out domestic workers are ‘the intimate outsiders and marginal insiders’ (Gamburd 2000). Here we look at different sentiments women carry on and about home. What are these sentiments and how do they allow women to deal with various il/licit discourses and legal interventions in their labour trajectories? What are the ways in which women understand home? Do they carry the sentiments when they leave their work?

### **The Dubai**

The movement of people and goods between Kerala and Dubai has a long history. The port of Dubai has always attracted traders and immigrants from India, while Arab traders established themselves on the coast of Kerala, with persons and goods moving across Arabian sea. The long history of interaction between Arabs and Mappila Muslims—in part descending from Arab traders—has been the impetus for the latter’s migration (Kurien 2002). Kuttichira, a small coastal village in Kozhikkode district, North Kerala, had trade links with Arab countries turning back to early 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. Traders from various Arab countries (UAE was not established as a single administrative territory then) used to come in large ships. There were instances of marriages between local women and Arab traders. A practice, which is popularly known as ‘*arabikalyanam*’ existed in this area. Many women entered into conjugal relationship with Arab traders and it was considered as an elevated social status. But most of these alliances were short lived and provided a few women social and material mobility.

### **Gender and Migration: Understanding the Interlinkages**

Gender plays an important role in the decision to migrate. Most of the studies on gender and migration in the context of Kerala are against the background of male migration (Prakash 1978, 1998, 2000; Gulati 1993; Zacharia et al 2001, 2002, 2004). For example, the study by Leela Gulati (1993) argues that male migration gives more agency to wives living back home. Feminisation of migration allows us to look at the process of globalisation with a gendered lens. Women’s economic upward mobility brings changes to the local environment. The remittances they send back home are a significant contribution to the upward mobility of many families. Research on gender and migration

shows that, women domestic workers have unusually high saving rates (86per cent) and remit a high proportion of their salary (64per cent) (Willoughby 2005). Women working as domestic workers usually belong to families of lower socio-economic status in the society. They bring changes to the social environment of the family, and to the society to an extent, though their identities at the site of employment move between legal/illegal and licit/illicit continuum.

Indian migrants working in the Gulf today are estimated to be around four million (Zacharia et al 2002). Nearly half of the migrants are from Kerala. The migration flow from Kerala to UAE has taken different turns at different point of time. Earlier migration was seen predominantly as a male affair where men move from one place to another for livelihood. Women were considered as passive agents either staying back at home or following their husbands at the workplace. Women's predominant role in migration was largely overlooked for a long time. In Kerala gender in migration study was mainly focused on the impact of migration among women who stayed back in Kerala. Most of the studies which focusing on 'Gulf Wives'<sup>3</sup>were looking at women's role from a different angle, a more immobile angle (Zacharia et al 2001; Gulati 1993). Several qualitative and ethnographic studies have come out later especially on women migrants belonging to particular employment categories. Women's active role in migration has been focused later by various scholars especially the study on women nurses to the gulf (Percot 2006) to US (George 2005) and to Italy (Gallo 2005). Women migrating to the Gulf see migration as a passport to escape from the traditional restrictive familial and social structures and also an initial entry-point in the travel plan to the west (Percot 2006). Women migrating to UAE consist of various categories such as nurses, women following their husbands after marriage, other professionals, domestic workers, etc. The categories of domestic workers make an interesting group to study the channels of migration because of the way government addresses the issue of women's mobility. In fact women nurses were a large group of women migrants from Kerala who have changed the dynamics of migration altogether. Domestic workers are another significant group of female migrants who changed the gender dimension of migration. State response to these two groups of migrants is entirely different. Earlier studies on Gulf migration show that there is a shift from men to women in the flow of domestic workers to UAE.

### **Categories of Domestic workers**

Based on living arrangements, women domestic workers can be classified broadly into Live-in and Live-out. Live-in domestic workers usually stay with the employers whereas live-out domestic workers live outside the employers' household. Even though these are the large categories of domestic workers, the nature of work depends more on the channels through which they migrate to UAE.

Domestic workers also can be classified based on the sponsorship system. Most of

the live-in domestic workers are the sponsored by a national for working in a national household. Live-in domestic workers sponsored by non-national sponsors are another category. Most of my respondents in this category were from Indian households. In Indian household, the facilities are relatively lesser and they get a less payment compared to national households. The complicated and expensive procedure of getting a domestic worker make many of the middle-class Indian family to go for paying a less salary to women or curtail other facilities which is supposed to provide for their domestic worker. Another major category of women domestic workers are women coming through private visa. Even though the concept of private visa is considered as illegal, many women cross borders by buying visa from agents. In such cases women are not bound to the sponsors and they get the freedom to work anywhere. Usually there will be a middle agent in the process. Large network of visa traders operate in this recruitment. Sometimes they get a single employer and can be a live-in. Mostly, the cases are live-out and part time. In the case of part-timers, they will have to look for accommodation outside which is very expensive. The notion about women sharing bed spaces in villas as illicit and illegal is quite prominent in UAE. Raids by CID and police are common in such villas. They also face harassment from landowners. Coming through private visa adds to the financial burden to many women because they end up paying huge sum to the agents as well as a huge amount every time visa needs to be renewed. So women prefer to work as part timers and make more money. Private visa gives relative freedom and bargaining power to many women but usually at the cost of various other complicated realities such as harassments by agents, sponsors and surveillance by CIDs. Especially at the time of visa renewal women go through all sorts of harassments from middle persons and agents.

There are also cases of women coming with a dependent visa (mostly through husband) and do work as domestics. Many women chose it as an additional income to deal with the increasing cost of living in UAE. Though they operate illegally their status is considered as legal compared to other women domestic workers. In some cases women come with various other kinds of visa and end up in domestic work.

During my fieldwork among domestic workers in UAE, cases of runaways are found among many. In such cases women enter UAE legally and later run away from their sponsors. There are also cases of women coming with private visa. Such domestic workers usually are re-employed to a middle-class non-national employer, usually an employer who doesnot want to go through the complicated process of sponsoring a domestic worker. These women get employment usually through an advertisement in the newspaper. The narratives vary significantly according to their illegal status as well as the nature of the household they are live-in. The trend of reemploying a runaway domestic worker is more among the middle class expatriate employers who cannot often afford the complicated procedures of sponsoring domestic workers. The large numbers

of visa traders sell visa to a local agent, usually an Indian and he/she recruits women to Dubai after taking a large sum of 1,50,000 Indian rupees (around 3600 USD). Many women aspiring to be domestic workers cannot afford this because of their family situation back at home. Even then, they try to arrange that much money through various means either by selling off the property or by taking loans from the local money lenders with the hope that reaching the gulf will help them to get away with poverty, dowry harassments and other poor living conditions in which they are subjected to. Even if they end up in a bad working condition, many women prefer to stay back until they make money they have invested for their travel.

### **Production of Moral Panic**

Leaving home brings a moral panic. This moral panic coupled with various other factors contributes to an illicit discourse around the mobility of women. In this section the various factors contributing to the 'moral panic' around women domestic workers has been discussed. Women, while leaving home, break the gendered notion about women and work. Contrary to the masculine notion about migration where men become economic provider and women as emotional provider, the life and work of migrant domestic workers breaks the gendered stereotypes to become the main economic provider and not always the emotional provider. Though women provide a strong support to the everyday survival of family, the role of women in the migration process are overlooked by emphasising at other 'vulnerable' aspects along the trajectories of their migration. This places them as somebody leaving the 'safety' of home for a more vulnerable and risky terrain of a foreign country. The association of women's mobility with her gendered sexuality as somebody easily vulnerable to sexual harassment also contributes to this moral panic. This moral panic builds a national sentiment about women leaving home. Various legal discourses are created along those sentiments. This makes the life and work of women domestic workers moving between the narrow boundaries of il/licitness and il/legality.

At this juncture, it is important to note that the vulnerability framework does not provide an adequate explanation to understand the complex relationships of state, migrants, and labour. It is pertinent to move beyond the classic vulnerability framework to understand the precarious nature of their work. When we say vulnerable, we do not address the structural violence that is institutionalized through various frameworks.

Interestingly women who were interviewed for the survey were unfazed by this moral panic. Women who decided to leave as domestic workers always wanted to go and the moral panic was seen as something beyond their everyday discourse and it was not practical enough for them to fall on that. Even though there is a moral panic produced around women's mobility, women domestic workers try to refute this or trivialise it with their non-conventional trajectories of labour. During my long interactions with many

women domestic workers in Kerala and in UAE, they reason out the necessity of leaving home. This rationalisation about their labour trajectories is often devoid of any over-production of emotions or sentiments associated with home. For many women domestic workers leaving home was important and necessary for their survival. The attempt here is not to reduce women's sentiments regarding home but those sentiments are often beyond the logic of a moral panic constructed by dominant discourse, supported by state's logic of protecting vulnerable women.

Reena, an undocumented domestic worker, who was interviewed both in UAE and in Kerala commented about the age ban on women:

“What do they (government) think? As an ordinary Malayali woman I am bound to get all kind of illness by the time I am 30 years. Nobody will take me for employment at that age. I need to work now. My family needs my economic support” Satidevi, a domestic worker living out in a bedspace in UAE, discussed her travel trajectory:

“I always wanted to travel outside to make more money. I had seen men and women in the neighbourhood when they come back from the Gulf. They were prosperous. I had realised it is difficult to manage. My husband did not have any proper income and I was taking care of home through the daily wage labour. My husband also did an unsuccessful Gulf visit. He went with a visiting visa and came back without finding any job. We also spent lots of money for his travel. My leaving home was never in his or in my family members agenda. But I always wanted to do that. When I saw some of my women neighbours became prosperous I asked myself ‘why can't I try once’? So I decided to start everything. There was no passport. I did not tell anybody at home. including my husband. I approached a travel agent whom I know and started the procedure. My family came to know only during the police verification time. I knew they would not allow me to apply for a passport. But once the passport is in my hand it is easier to negotiate. So I did it exactly that way. There was initial objection from my husband. Later he also realized it is better considering our financial situation”

Sati reached UAE and worked as a domestic worker in an Emirati household for two years. After two years she cancelled her visa and went back home. She came back procuring a private visa (from a visa trader), which allowed her to work outside the surveillance of her sponsor. She started working as a part-time domestic worker. Sati made contacts with agents in UAE and also started playing a crucial role as a middle person in the visa trading industry in UAE.

From a ‘rational’ framework the production of such moral panic is to sensitise the public to the issue. But the rationality of the state and other dominant discourses often conflict with the more practical needs of women domestic workers. This moral panic also contributes to a trafficking discourse and which in turn seeks legal intervention. And these are moments where the way women see their act of leaving home comes into conflict with larger and dominant version about gendered concept of home. Women's

work as domestic worker is not considered problematic as long as they work in India. It becomes an issue of moral panic when they cross the boundaries of house and Nation-state. This is yet another example where women are considered as the one embodying the Nation and men as the real citizens. Crossing the border transgresses not only the conventional femininity, but also questions the conventional wisdoms of morality, motherhood and sexuality.

### **Re-articulating Domesticity: Engaging a 'New' Home**

The normative notion about women domestic workers as the one breaking the gender stereotypes is widely prevalent in the popular discourse. It falls into the trap of assuming domesticity and gendered articulation as a homogenous process and refuse to see the different ways in which women perform their domesticity. Life stories from women suggest diverse ways in which women articulate their domesticity even in their pre-migration phase. That is one of the reasons leaving home becomes not too much an emotional burden for many women. During fieldwork in Kuttichira, it was revealed that many women leave as migrant workers from this small fishing hamlet compared to men. It breaks the dominant notion about men travel first and then women follow. It was realised that due to the presence of a strong labour market coupled with less cumbersome travel path, make the journey relatively easier for women. Domestic work, which is considered as 'unskilled' labour, also makes the process of travel easier for women.

Sofia an ex-domestic worker who was interviewed in Kerala along with her husband told me that her husband never thought about leaving abroad for work. "If he has to travel we should pay more whereas it was easier for me to pay". Sofia's husband who works as a private security guard in Kerala managed the home when Sofia was away. "*We did not have a proper house until she left. We made this house after she started remitting money*".

Do women domestic workers try to integrate into the 'new' home? It is also becomes a new adopted home. The specificity of domestic labour makes distinction between worksite and the place of living very blurred and often absent. Somebody's intimate space-home-becomes a public workspace for these women. It makes it difficult for women to distinguish paid work and general extension of household tasks. As workers insider the home, women domestic workers get entangled into the gendered articulations of domesticity and its various complexities. During my initial conversations with employers to get details of their domestic workers many responses went like this, "Oh we don't consider her as a 'servant'. She is part of our family". This assumed generosity from the employers makes it difficult to see domestic work like any other paid work. That also gives less opportunity for women to verbalize or express the inequality. Rather they tend to say often that 'such things are common in a family. We should tolerate'.

Here the paid worker gets integrated into the family and the hierarchy often hides from immediate visibility. This partial integration also comes with its own share of tensions and anxieties among some women domestic workers as well as employers.

The integration into the family of the employers is a complex one. For instance, Thankamma, a domestic worker, who has been working for eight years in Dubai, integration was never a convenient and easy process. Her son and daughter deserted her after taking all the money she had saved, during the years of employment in the Gulf. She used to send money to her children with an expectation that they would save that adequately so that she could buy a house. Upon return Thankamma realised that she was unwanted in the house and there was no increase in her salary. She was drawing salary of 500 Dirham, which she was receiving ever since she started the work.

“They are treating me well. My Madam’s daughter considers me like her grandmother. She is very nice and loving. I didn’t get that kind of love and affection from my own children. Even though the salary is less I am ready to adjust. They at least consider me as a family member.”

This integration into the ‘family’ was short lived. Thing started changing when Thankamma’s employer’s mother visited from India. Thankamma’s employer’s daughter could not accept the way Thankamma interacted with her grandchild.

“That woman shouts at me. She does not like me interacting with the little child. But the little daughter has all love towards me more than her grandmother. She was asking my madam to remove me and appoint somebody young. She (madam’s mother) thinks I am not efficient”.

Towards the end of the fieldwork I learnt that the employer had cancelled Thankamma’s visa and sent her back to Kerala. These are situations where we see domestic work crosses the boundary of work and intimacy and make it complicated to deal with.

Annamma, another domestic worker who worked for an Indian family also dealt with this problem of intimacy and tension at her employer’s house. Annamma’s employer’s daughter used to get angry whenever she tried to show intimacy towards her.

“My daughter doesn’t like her (Annamma). She (daughter) usually complains that she (Annamma) behaves like me”, Annamma’s employer told me. For an upwardly mobile class-conscious Indian family a domestic worker crossing the boundaries of degree of intimacy was enough reason to bring tension. Annamma also had to deal with the employer accusing her of trying to be like her (employer) by imitating their lifestyle. This tension came out very obviously in Indian households. In the national households it was easier to deal with since the already laid boundaries are much more clear and difficult to break. Live-in and live-out domestic sense of belonging differ, when it comes to the matter of home. In the case of live-in domestic workers workspace and personal space are always at the same place. But in the case of live-out things are much different. Women who live outside the surveillance of their employers get a demarcated living and working space.

Many of these women, who live outside, in the bed spaces, carry the notion of belonging with them wherever they move. The tension and anxiety they share with the employers are very less compared to women live-in.

The notion of home get altered for women depending on the types of houses in which they work. In Indian family life-work distinction is not much clear as compared to Emirati household. The spatial structure (with large area with separate living quarters) of the house also provides the personal sphere for women domestic workers in Emirati houses, which help them to demarcate their life and personal sphere differently.

Shameema, an undocumented runaway domestic worker described her life story. Shameema came to UAE, three years ago with a visa arranged by her sister-in-law. Upon arrival she has been picked up from the airport by her sponsor's relative for whom she was supposed to work. Shameema says, "It was a one room house where an old Omani man, his third wife and three children were staying. My sponsor was that man's relative. He was old and sick and my duty was to take care of him. But I ended up doing all odd jobs in that house"

Shameema said her working hours were not fixed. She ended up working from dawn to dusk along with looking after the person she was assigned to. The family where she worked was not economically well off. They did not pay her always. Food was limited. Shameema says, "They did not have proper food. Then how can they feed me?" Shameema was often asked to get food from the neighbouring house. There were not many houses. House seen around were all 'Arab' houses. She had no contact with her sponsor either. Her passport was with the sponsor. Shameema managed to live in that house for three weeks. One night the person she was taking care of tried to assault her sexually. Shameema left that house the next day and called up her sister in law. She went and stayed with her sister-in-law and later managed to get work in an Indian family.

During their long trajectories of travel women domestic workers go through different and varied notions of domesticity. At times they make alternate relationship and temporary homes within the temporary phase of migrations. 'Boyfriends' play a crucial role in the lives of many domestic workers. Set-up (a term used in UAE for men and women living together out of wedlock) or the temporary arrangement of family was one of the ways of living for many women who live outside the employer's household. Set-up helps women and also men to deal with various practical problems they encounter in the worksite. In the case of run-away domestic workers, living with somebody as a 'family' help to get a legitimising discourse to deal with the surveillance of police. Some relationships move from a set-up to more permanent relationships where women try to make a new family in the UAE.

Hussaiba, a part-time live-out domestic worker discussed her long and interesting life trajectory during the survey in UAE.

"I got married when I was just 13 years old. My husband left for Saudi Arabia when I

was pregnant and came back after the child was born. He arranged a visa for me and took me to Saudi Arabia. I was 15 years old then. My child was with my mother. We returned from Saudi when my son was 4 years old. So my mother was the one who actually looked after my son. I came back and we built a house with whatever saving we had but my husband sold that house and he also took all the money and gold I had. He told me he wanted to arrange money to get a private visa. We shifted to a rented house. He left and never returned. I had to pay the rent and there was no money. I started working as a domestic in neighbouring houses. One of the families where I worked arranged a visa for me. I left my son with my mother again. I did not tell her where I was going. I did not tell this to any one of my family members. I started working in an Emirati family. There was full of hardship. I had to get up early morning to wash the car, gardening, cooking. It was a huge house. I did not get sufficient food to eat. I used to cry everyday. A Malayali man who used to work in the neighbourhood saw my hardship and told me that he could help me to get better employment somewhere else. This was the time my employers were thinking of cancelling my visa. So I had no choice. Going home was not an option. There was nothing for me to survive. With the help of this man I ran away from that house. Then onwards I started working in various houses as a part-time domestic without any documents. (Her passport was confiscated by the previous employer) The man who befriended me gave support throughout this period. After three years of working like this (as an undocumented worker) I was caught by the police. They sent me to women's jail and after 45 days deported back to India.

Hussaiba stayed in India barely for a month and managed to procure another passport and she came back to UAE. Hussaiba started working again and she married her boyfriend. She also brought her son from Kerala.

Hussaiba's life shows the trajectories in which migrant domestic workers pass through. When poverty and other difficult situations pushed her to a corner, Hussaiba took difficult choices, rather unconventional choices in life. Leaving her small baby boy back home was one such choice. Though there was an unconventional domesticity in play in the case of Hussaiba, as it is the case with many other women migrant domestic workers, it usually becomes a temporary period. It is rather reserved for a future domesticity, as we see here. As we have seen in the example of Hussaiba, now staying in UAE with her son and second husband Hussaiba tries to play the domesticity denied/not available to her earlier.

As described earlier, women chose to leave for varieties of reasons. At times it is a painful departure of leaving intimate family members and at times it is a relief from situations from which they wanted to get some relief. In the case of women domestic workers there is a strong labour market for them in UAE. Those forces many women to leave home and travel as migrant domestic workers and women found it relatively easier compared to men.

Women migration is a constant source of economic support for this many poor household in Kerala. As my data indicates, the traditional occupations such as fishing has given way to the bigger privatised machine fishing (trolling) where traditional fisher folk lose their daily subsistence. Migrating to the Gulf is one of the ways to overcome poverty and upscale unemployment. Men find it extremely difficult to migrate abroad due to lack of money to pay for visa and airfare. In the case of women, migrating is relatively cheaper where the agent usually asks for half the amount they ask from men. They will have to pay an amount of 50,000 to 1,00,000 Indian Rupees where as men have to pay an amount of 2,00,000 to 3,00,000 Indian Rupees. Going to the gulf countries as a domestic worker is a temporary phase for many women where they work and make money. After acquiring enough money they send their men folk in the gulf and take care of the family. There are cases where women arrange visa for their men folk. It was observed in Kuttichira that women's remittance become one of the determining economy in this area. For women migration to the gulf is not only to overcome unemployment and poverty but also for the survival of the entire family members. A standard practice of acquiring money was through mortgaging property; here in the case of women domestic workers usually it is home since many of them do not have any other property to mortgage. Here we can see that home is stretching far away from the sentiments of one's own place of belonging. Women mortgage her home in anticipation to make a better home upon their arrival. Here the notion of home brings far-reaching meaning. Life situation also urges many women to down play their sentiments at least temporarily.

Most women domestic workers interviewed showed the fact that leaving home was not really a difficult moment for them. They wanted to leave because the situation demanded them to leave. While leaving they break the various laid assumptions about domesticity. Family arrangement gets reshaped as women move.

After returning home, they realise that it is not the same as the way they left it. Some get into a more 'better' home what they anticipated but for many others it also brings a sense of homelessness. Years of living in the gulf estrange certain relationships and women often go back to place where they do not feel any sense of belonging. I had described the life of Thankamma earlier where she was disowned by her own children and she realised there is no home for her to go back to. This forced her to go back to a life of migrant domestic worker again. This anxiety of going back to a void where they do not feel a sense of belonging was verbalised by many women during my interaction with them. Years of living only as an economic provider change certain relations, if not all. Leaving home was an act of joy and relief for MariyamBeevi. "I ran away from that house due to extreme violence". There was sign of relief when Mariyam Beevi described her life.

Mariyam Beevi, as a Muslim woman married to a Hindu Man was enough reason for facing problems from both families. But soon after the marriage she started facing violence from her husband. Leaving for UAE with the help of an agent was a crucial

decision she made to leave the abusive home environment to regain her lost self-esteem. During the interview, Mariyam Beevi in Dubai, she was in a status of an undocumented worker. She had run away from her original sponsor. Mariyam Beevi said;

“I have only one grief that I could not make a house of my own. When I came here I sent money to my family hoping that they would forget everything and welcome me in the family. But I forgot to invest something for myself. There is no home for me when I go back now”

Mariyam Beevi's attempted to deal with the estranged relationship with her family members. But she fears that her family would disown her again when they realize she is no longer the economic provider. Her undocumented status and the fear that she may be deported anytime showed her insecurity of not having a home of her own.

Leaving home for making a new and better home is how many women describe their decision to migrate in search of work. Sofia narrates, “We used to live in the ‘Bangladesh colony’ in a shanty house. We wanted to leave that area since it was not ‘safe’ and we did not have a proper house.” As soon as Sofia started sending money from the Gulf, her husband along with two children moved from Bangladesh colony to a more ‘safe’ location in Kozhikkode in a rented house. They bought some land and constructed a house. By the time Sofia came back her house construction was almost over and she could move into the new house along with her husband and children.

Rubi, is another woman surveyed who worked as a domestic worker for a long time and is now running a successful business in UAE. Making a stable home and a better future for her children was her ambition when she left for working as a domestic worker. She left her two daughters with the custody of her sister and came to UAE to work in an Emirati household as a live-in domestic worker. Eventually Rubi could manage to move up to the economic ladder. Now she is running a business with the help of her previous Emirati sponsor. This upward mobility did not give the anticipated stability at her home front. She was estranged from her own daughters and sister (they disowned her). Now living with her boyfriend after converting to Islam, Rubi wants to make a new home with the new family that she has adopted.

In the case of many of these women, home comes in their life narratives either as a broken home, lost home or as a commodity to exchange for her travel. Home also deals with a variety of sentiments, which are very different from a dominant notion about moral panic associated with their travel. As we have seen from the examples above, home transforms as a commodity to exchange for getting visa and travel documents. But many return migrant stories show the way home travels along the travel paths of women domestic workers and gives new and different meaning to it. Thus home plays varied roles in the lives of women migrant domestic workers and sometimes it brings them to a conformist and conventional role from a long and non-conventional life trajectory of the migrant domestic worker.

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