

# Migrant Memoirs from the Middle East

*The Perspective of Pink Collar Workers  
Coming from South Asia to the Middle  
East*

by

Malini Mittal Bishnoi

# Migrant Memoirs from the Middle East: The Perspective of Pink Collar Workers Coming from South Asia to the Middle East

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To those women who build, nurture, and sustain worlds far from home

This book is dedicated to my mother -Prem Lata Mittal whose patience and spirit sustained me through time. She is the epitome of resilience and devotion to every member of her family and humanity at large. Her life is a testament to the power of positive action without the desire for fruits also reinstated in the Hindu scriptures.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन | (Sanskrit (Devanagari))

*Karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana* | (Roman Transliteration)

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions."

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I owe it to my parents and grandparents who believed in laying the foundation for education and learning, especially for girls.

My sister, brother-in-law and my dearest nephew Shaurya for being my rock in letter and spirit and having my back in the toughest times. My husband, for enduring my Ph. D journey and believing in me when I was unsure. My children, Lakshya and Rhea, who persevered my petulance through the years of my study and work. The love, patience and understanding extended to me by my family cannot be put into words and thanked enough.

In recognition of the collective effort, I am reminded of the Sanskrit shloka:

“सह नावतु। सह नौ भुनक्तु। सह वीर्यं करवावहे।”

("May we be protected together. May we be nourished together. May we work together with great energy.")

This timeless wisdom from the “Bhagwat Gita” (Indian scripture) reflects the spirit of collaboration and support that can shape any ambition in life also has shaped this book which is very close to my heart. To everyone who has contributed, explicitly or obliquely, I offer my sincere thanks and indebtedness.

Last but not the least, I am supremely obliged to Ethics Press, UK, for their assistance through the publication process.



# Foreword

Dr. Malini Mittal Bishnoi's book is tenaciously conceived novel research that articulates pink-collar workers chronicles as it is. It is my honor to introduce her empirical monograph on Migrant Memoirs from the Middle East: The Perspective of Pink Collar Workers coming from South Asia to the Middle East. Migration is a significant and recurrent phenomenon in the historical trajectory of humans. The history of migration and that of human evolution coincides and has shaped nations, cultures and communities in profound ways.

The author has contextualized migration patterns from parts of South Asia to Middle-East with specific reference to the Gulf country of Kuwait. She introduces the migrant "pink-collar workers as a distinguishable category of workers" who have remained rather peripheral in the migrant literature. She projects a verbatim memoir of the workers stories which reflect their didactic dilemmas and debilitating circumstances throughout their sojourn.

The author has dealt with migration trends of South Asian women who are essentially employed as domestic workers, caregivers and women employed in semi-skilled jobs. The fact that the workers mobility majorly shapes their economic hardships in their home countries and matches the demand for domestic labour is provided a microscopic lens of riveting narratives. The exploitative role of informal recruitment channels and the workers vulnerability find expression with real voices of women workers. The author's diagrammatic representation of the biological prism of migrant worker is novel and inspiring.

The author presents a worm's eye view of worker types, classifying them into Legal, Illegally Legal and illegal. The discussions on how economic marginalization is exploited and how the migrant workers manage to mitigate their vulnerabilities in-migrant environments are articulated with realistic cases. The diagram of migrant myopia offers a perceptive view of migrant prejudice.

The book explores how the regional backgrounds shape migration experiences, ambitions, and identities of migrant women. The author highlights the intersection of social class, gender, caste, and patriarchal norms, analysing how these factors influence women's decisions to migrate, their integration into host societies, and their besieging struggles with identity and social mobility.

Personal narratives illustrate the complex interplay between economic necessity, cultural expectations, and the pursuit of a better life. Sociological theories like Symbolic Interactionism, Habitus, Intersectionality, and Critical Theory help to analyse how these women navigate discrimination, shifting gender roles, and the persistence of caste and class distinctions both at home and abroad.

The author's narration on regional, cultural, and socio-economic factors as enablers of agential practices and transformation of identities of pink-collar workers and the analysis on gender norms, marriage customs, and family structures intersecting with globalization and economic necessity reflect her intense field work, sleight of hand and literary acumen. The book reveals the importance of social and family networks especially maternal and extended kin who also play a crucial role in supporting the migrant women emotionally and practically, enabling them to cope with challenges such as spousal abandonment, childcare, and job insecurity. The discussion on the "**dinar rubric**" is original and offers many insights for researchers in the field.

Despite difficulties, pink-collar workers demonstrate resilience and agency, forging new identities and support systems is evident in this longitudinal research.

The Dinar pursuit and pseudo-freedom are reflective of the migrant workers' tussle with needs and wants. The personal narratives bring out the interface of working for money in the country of the other and the othering of migrants in their home country. The remittance economy outplaying structural injustices, gendered vulnerabilities, and the empowerment of marginalized women is an important addition to the domain of migration studies. The risks and paradoxes of migrant women are depicted with transparent visualization.

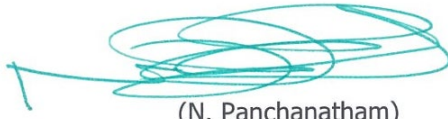
The author's simple yet powerful presentation of the migrant women lived experiences, and the description of social capital is a gift to future researchers who would like to indulge in migration research especially focused on vulnerability and labour exploitation in host countries. The author also frequently indicates the pathways for protecting the rights and dignity of migrant workers in both home and host countries.

Each section is treated with care, elevating the discourse on pink-collar migration with substantial evidence from the field. It is true that migrant women workers deliver an extraordinary contribution to their families and societies they belong to. The exhibit of empowerment prism brings new insights and ensures that the reader is both informed and inspired to reflect more deeply on the complexities of migration.

I commend the author for hewing a work that is as intellectually rigorous as it is filled with heart, and I am confident that readers will find in these pages a deeper appreciation for the courage and dignity of migrant women anywhere in the world.

It is my honour to introduce this important book and to celebrate the author's dedication to a subject that touches us all. May it foster greater understanding, compassion, and action on behalf of migrant women workers around the world.

Best wishes to Dr. Malini to continue her contribution to the field of sociology and migration studies.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

(N. Panchanatham)



VICE-CHANCELLOR  
The Gandhigram Rural Institute  
(Deemed  
to be University)  
Tamil  
Nadu, India

# Chapter One

## Pink-Collar Migrant Workers in Kuwait: Reviewing Migration Trends and Practices Through a Biographical Prism

### Introduction

Migration has played a central role in shaping Arab societies throughout history. The historical significance of migration from South Asia to the Gulf region is deeply rooted in the longstanding trade connections between India and the Persian Gulf. This migration phenomenon dates to a period that predates written historical records, when trade in textiles and essential commodities gradually evolved into a more complex financial advisory relationship between affluent Indian merchants and native families in the Gulf.

As we approach the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we witness a growing influx of accountants and clerks drawn to the Gulf region to meet the administrative needs of British India's colonial apparatus. This period also coincides with the discovery of petroleum, which led to a surge in demand for foreign labour, especially in the form of unskilled expatriates<sup>1</sup>. This historical context laid the groundwork for the complex and multifaceted migration patterns that followed.

The gulf nations are the third largest migration destination in the world next to North America and Europe. These countries are the second home to around 10.1 percent of the total migrants worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner (2011) provides a detailed account of the periodic Gulf–South Asian migratory history.

Kuwait is one amongst the gulf nations where large number of migrants are flowing in essentially for domestic and household employment. As per the population statistics of 2021, 70.1% of the Kuwaiti population are expatriates employed mostly in the non-governmental sector; specifically in the domestic sector<sup>2</sup>

This section explores the intricate connections established by labourers from Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southern India with the Gulf region, focusing specifically on Kuwait since 2005. It examines the various employment opportunities that attract these pink-collar job seekers, shedding light on their preferences and the specific work environments they encounter in Kuwait's pink-collar sector. Additionally, this title scrutinizes the mechanics of the visa system, particularly the sponsorship system that governs these workers in Kuwait. It delves into the profound impact this system has on the flow of labour from these South Asian countries into Kuwait, effectively unravelling the dynamics of this complex labour migration process and its interplay with migrant contexts.

## **Understanding Pink-collar Migrant Workers**

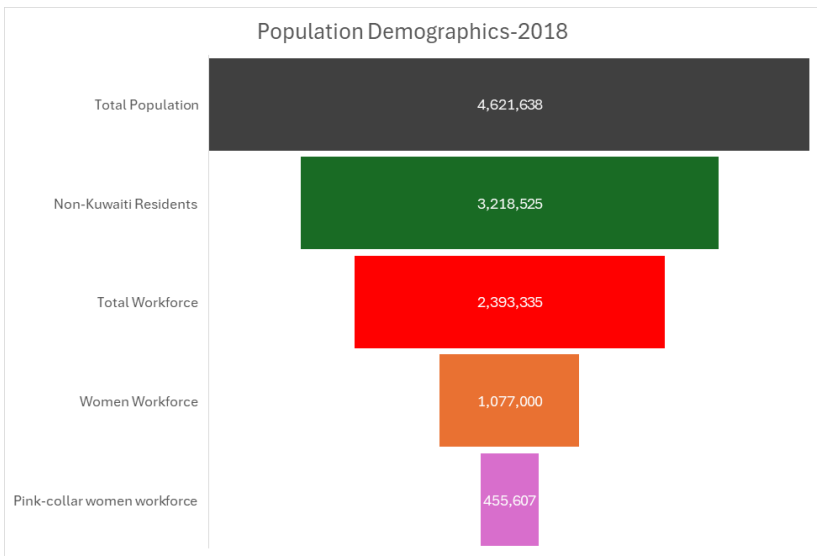
'Pink-collar jobs' refer to roles historically associated with women, commonly found in caregiving, healthcare, and education sectors. This gendered concentration often perpetuates stereotypes about these jobs and those who perform them. Society tends to assume that women are naturally more suited for these roles due to their perceived nurturing qualities. Consequently, pink-collar jobs are frequently underpaid, undervalued and offer limited opportunities for career

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<sup>2</sup> De Bel-Air, F., & Paul, A. M. (2025, July). 15th Gulf Research Meeting Cambridge, 22-24 July 2025 Workshop No. 11 Highly Skilled Migrants and the GCC countries Drivers, Perceptions, Policies, and New Dynamics. In *Workshop No* (Vol. 22, p. 24).

advancement. These factors make such roles less appealing to men and create barriers for women seeking to enter male-dominated fields.

Kuwait is populated most by expatriates, with substantial implications in the labor market and social dynamics. According to the recent published reports, expatriates are around 71 percent of the Kuwaiti population accounting approximately to 3.2 million. The largest group of expats are from South-Asia especially India (31%). In terms of employment, 96% of the expat population are serving in the private sector workforce<sup>2</sup>.



**Figure 1.1:** Population demography of Kuwait, 2018

Source: [https://census.csb.gov.kw/Census\\_Work\\_EN](https://census.csb.gov.kw/Census_Work_EN)

**Sociological Reasoning:**

While women workers identify primarily with the pink-collar category, their actual social position is influenced by multiple axes of difference such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and their unique abilities to learn new skills and adapt culturally. A key assumption of intersectional thinking is that categories like gender, class, race/ethnicity and age are significant social divisions that influence power dynamics not only at the macro level but also in individuals' everyday lives (Davis 2008). The choices made by these women are shaped by the interplay of global and local forces (Oishi 2005; Gamburd 2008). Push factors (high unemployment, low wages and poverty) from their countries of origin, often drive a large migration of labour from capital-short, labour-rich regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia to labour-short, capital-rich countries of the West<sup>3</sup>. In the Gulf region, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of workers in jobs traditionally associated with women, often referred to as 'pink-collar' roles. These workers have become an integral part of Kuwait's society and economy. More and more women from South Asian countries are coming to work in Kuwait in jobs typically undertaken by women. This trend highlights inconsistencies in the recruitment process, leading to disparities in their access to fair employment.

**Trends, Implications and Socio-Economic Context**

The number of South Asian workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, began to increase significantly after the Gulf War in 1990. This surge was impactful for both the migrant workers and the local populations. The GCC region became a viable option for individuals from countries like India,

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<sup>3</sup> Doherty, Leung, Lorenze and Wilmarth (2014) deliberate on South Asian labor migration and discuss the political and economic factors that create the push for labor migration from the regions under study to other parts of world including Gulf countries. Also see Oishi (2005) for a further discussion on feminization of labor to the Gulf.



Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to find employment. These countries send a large number of workers to the GCC. Research indicates that from 1990 to 2023, the number of South Asian migrant workers steadily increased each year. On the other hand, the GCC countries had filtered out about two million workers from neighbouring Arab countries. To fill this gap, they have welcomed better-trained workers from South Asian countries<sup>4</sup>. The GCC countries have become the preferred destination for low-skilled temporary workers from South Asia. Over time, even highly educated and skilled workers from South Asia have been taking up low-skilled jobs in these countries. The shortage of local women in service jobs has created a demand for various types of female workers. Many migrants from South Asia are skilled but struggle to find suitable employment in their home countries, leading to a continuous flow of workers through informal networks. This trend is part of a global pattern where workers from the Far East migrate to the central regions to bridge the wage gap. Female workers play a significant role in this migration because both sending and receiving countries have historically operated under patriarchal norms, where men were not typically entrusted with domestic and care work. Consequently, female workers in these fields are in high demand but are often paid less. Some locals exploit the sponsorship system to bring in workers illegally for profit. This practice has become more common over the last ten years, particularly involving South Asian countries. This cycle of recruitment, coupled with the supposed freedom of workers after

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the prevalence of low-skilled migration to the GCC countries, studies have found that labour migrants from the study area continue to flock to the region to fill the same positions, regardless of educational attainment. In other words, migrants with higher levels of education are willing to work in unskilled positions.

their contracts end, has led to an increase in pink-collar workers in Kuwait<sup>5</sup>.

The feminization of labour migration may not necessarily stem from push factors, although these can be significant causes of international female migration at an individual level (Oishi 2005). This is evident from the lowest percentages of female migration from countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, which have high poverty and unemployment rates. In the Gulf region, factors such as infrastructure development, economic diversification plans, modernization and westernization, along with the minimal representation of native women in the service industry, have increased the demand for a diverse range of semi-skilled and skilled pink-collar labour from South Asia<sup>6</sup>. This demand has further intensified chain migration through informal and illegal channels from South Asia, including the three regions under study. Social divisions in both sending and receiving societies are evident in the functioning of institutions (such as state law, organizations and family) and in people's subjective experiences<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Genova and Peutz (2010) articulate this migrant flux as routinized practice to obscure the historically particular political and administrative processes by which deportability, or the very possibility of being deported, is produced and imposed. Estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of workers in the GCC States are currently undocumented. Also see Kapiszewski (2001), Crystal (2005), Dresch and Piscatori (2005) and Doherty, Leung, Lorenze and Wilmarth (2014) for the numerical assessment of deportations in Kuwait.

<sup>6</sup> Goodwin (2009) provides a detailed narrative of the framework of modernization, westernization, globalization and individualization and their impact on decision-making and personal relationships. Gardner (2011) provides a detailed account of the processes of economic diversification underway in the Gulf region and its impact on women's mobility from South Asia.

<sup>7</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis (2006 b:198) reminds us that social divisions also exist in the ways people subjectively experience their daily lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific

It is crucial to examine evidence showing how many migrant women in Kuwait feel displaced and insecure yet continue to work under the constant fear of deportation. Meanwhile, the state is intensifying efforts to control the flow of migrant labour. Estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of workers in the GCC states are currently 'undocumented'<sup>8</sup>

My six years of research in Kuwait, including interactions with both the government and private sector, have revealed the flaws in market-based reforms. Kuwait's administrative system is highly political and intricate, with a bureaucracy that resembles a complex web. Privatization and Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) often serve as convenient channels for influential bureaucrats to direct government contracts to their kith and kin<sup>9</sup>. For instance, in the case of Kerala migrants, facilitating their entry to the Gulf and their upkeep in these states has become a billion-dollar industry. This industry involves Gulf nationals, expatriate businesspeople in the Gulf, and licensed and unlicensed recruitment agents in Kerala. Before discussing the trends of migration to Kuwait and the entry of pink-collar workers through the sponsorship system, it's essential to explore the opportunities available to these workers in Kuwait.

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identities. Importantly, this includes not only what they think about themselves and their communities but also their attitudes and prejudices towards others. Finally, they also exist at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies, including those to do with legislation.

<sup>8</sup> Doherty, Leung, Lorenze and Wilmarth (2014) deliberate on South Asian labor migration and discuss the political and economic factors that create the push for labor migration from the regions under study to other parts of world including Gulf countries. Also see Oishi (2005) for a further discussion on feminization of labor to the Gulf

<sup>9</sup> Biygautane, Gerber and Hodge (2017) elaborate on the challenges presented by traditionally driven societies such as Kuwait in the implementation of administrative reforms.

## **Pink Collar Work in the Gulf Region**

In the Gulf region, the association of certain types of work with women has been a long-standing social practice, even though it might seem unusual in a modern capitalist society. This gender-based classification of work has led to inequalities and the exploitation of 'pink-collar' workers. The local socio-political and religious environment plays a significant role in deciding who got to work, stay and leave in the Gulf countries. This is especially crucial due to the policy of gender segregation in the region, influenced by religious beliefs that also shape the legal system across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Some scholars have argued that Islamic beliefs about gender roles contribute to this segregation. One key area influenced by these beliefs is the Sharia-based laws related to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, which often grant different rights to men and women<sup>10</sup>. There's a focus on women's chastity and obedience as essential qualities of a Muslim woman. These ideological boundaries result in a system where certain types of work are assigned based on gender, with men and women having different roles in the workforce<sup>11</sup>

However, there have been changes in recent years. Kuwaiti women have entered the white-collar workforce, partly due to higher education and a decrease in religious conservatism in Kuwaiti

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<sup>10</sup> Bates and Rassam (2001) articulate that what we term as "traditional veiling" was transmitted from one generation to the next, symbolically affirming continuity of an Islamic gender ideology that called for a public concealment of female sexuality and the segregation of sexes.

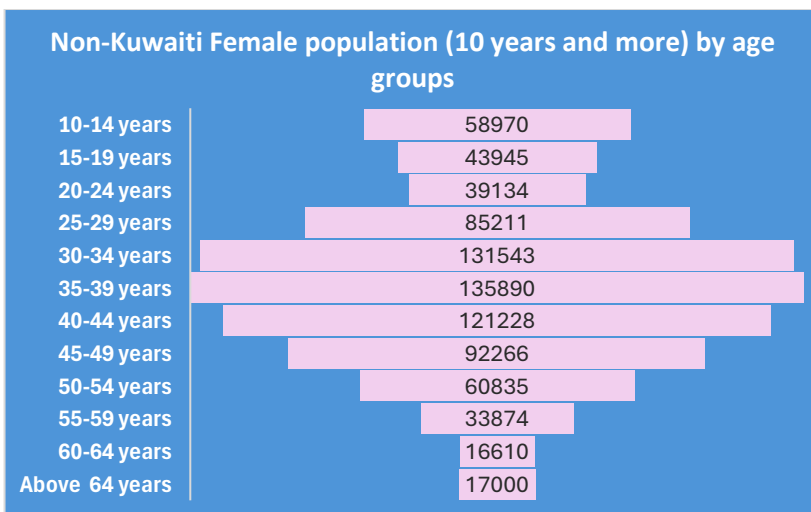
<sup>11</sup> For contemporary approaches to interpreting gender issues in the Quran, consider the work of Stowasser (1994) and Taraki (2008:335) who examines the reality of women living in the Middle East. Refer to Bowen (2002) for an insight into the mundane life of Muslims in the Middle East.

society<sup>12</sup>. Two notable authors and public intellectuals in Kuwait, Kawakib al-Mulham and the Shi'ite activist Khadijah al-Mahmeed, exemplify this shift. Both women are esteemed scholars and articulate public speakers with significant followings in the Gulf region. Kawakib al-Mulham directly challenges conventional masculinist interpretations of Islam by Kuwaiti religious revivalists opposes efforts to exclude women from public life. Khadijah al-Mahmeed calls for a *nahda fikria*, a social and intellectual renaissance that would reimagine women's nature and social roles, and 'recognize them as autonomous human beings participating as full members of society'<sup>13</sup> Both women are well-versed in religious scriptures and provide practical suggestions for achieving gender equality within Islam, directly opposing Islamist-led campaigns that seek to limit higher educational and job opportunities for women.

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<sup>12</sup> Taraki (2008:335) provides a deeper understanding of the impact of women's higher education in the Middle East.

<sup>13</sup> Hosni and Qudsi (2017) provide a statistical analysis of the role of women in the labor market of Kuwait.



**Figure 1.2:** Non-Kuwaiti female population by age groups

Source: (Kuwait Population Census by Data, 2021- The Public Authority for Civil Information, Kuwait)

This change has not gone uncontested. Religious fundamentalists have resisted these shifts, and the role of mass media in shaping public opinion has been a topic of debate. 'Development in mass media and communications challenges the traditional authority of Muslim religious scholars.' However, 'constraints on civil society and the media are at the root of the region's freedom deficit'. Thus, reduced religious fanaticism among sections of Arab society, coupled with the recognition of restrictions on civil liberties, has created an environment of socio-cultural transition in the Gulf region. Furthermore, the increasing emancipation of women, whether due to education or reduced religious fanaticism, has led to an increase in the demand of workers in the pink-collar category, especially those employed as domestic workers.

Some argue that the rise in pink-collar migrant workers from South Asia in Kuwait cannot be solely attributed to the increased participation of Arab women in the workforce. These jobs are often perceived as a way to utilize spare time with less work pressure. However, the nearly equal participation of Kuwaiti women and men in the labour force suggests a possible connection between the two trends. As pink-collar workers provide support in managing households, more Kuwaiti women are able to take on roles in the workforce. This interplay indicates that the availability of pink-collar labour may facilitate greater workforce participation among Kuwaiti women.

### **The Intersection of Religion, Tradition and Employment Patterns in Kuwait**

Throughout its history, Kuwait has been profoundly influenced by Islamic values, particularly in the context of work and business. Islam has significantly shaped the attitudes and decisions of Arab men in Kuwait. Many researchers contend that Islam encourages and values business activities, viewing them as both beneficial and important. Islam promotes a balanced approach to work, considering the interests of various stakeholders, thus nurturing a holistic view of economic activities.

Kuwaiti men have traditionally made their livelihoods through various family-owned businesses, ranging from large to small enterprises. The foundation of Kuwait's private sector is comprised of descendants of early merchant families who have long been engaged in commerce, trade and banking. The relationship between the ruling family and the merchant community is based on an unwritten agreement, whereby, merchants agree to stay out of politics. However, some merchants have attempted to challenge this arrange-

ment by advocating for a more institutionalized form of shared decision-making.

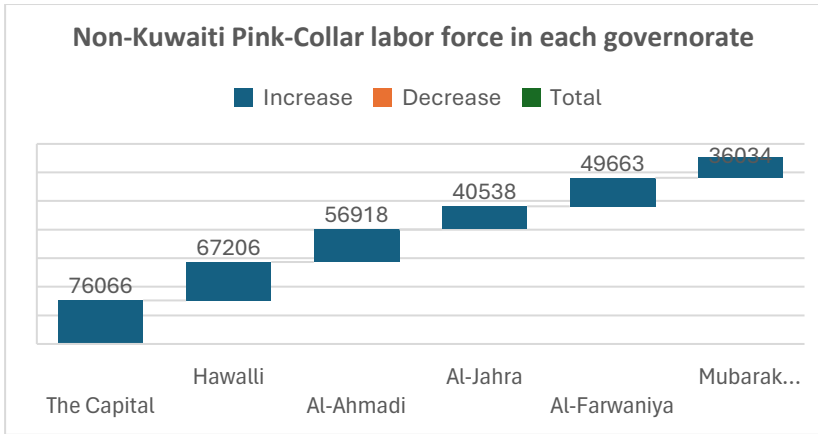
In Kuwait, informal socio-political groups known as *Diwaniyyeh* play a crucial role. These gatherings, held nightly, serve as forums for shaping, filtering and transmitting Kuwaiti public opinion on various issues<sup>14</sup>. The *Diwaniyyeh* function as centres from which 'influence' (*wasta*) emanates, intricately weaving into the social fabric of Kuwaiti society<sup>15</sup>. The interactions that take place in these *Diwaniyyeh* gatherings often lead to informal approval of worker categories that are sometimes referred to as 'legally illegal free workers'. Some even use the term 'Azad visa' (with Azad being the Persian word for 'free') to describe this status. It can be deduced that the influence of these *Diwaniyyehs* plays a significant role in maintaining the government's permission to import workers.

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<sup>14</sup> The main sources for the discussion of Kuwaiti politics include Crystal (1986) who analyses the relationship between the ruling family and the merchant community in depth. Also Ismael (1982) Migdal (1979) offer relevant insights.

<sup>15</sup> *Wasta* is the Arab colloquial for influence implying connections with people in power.

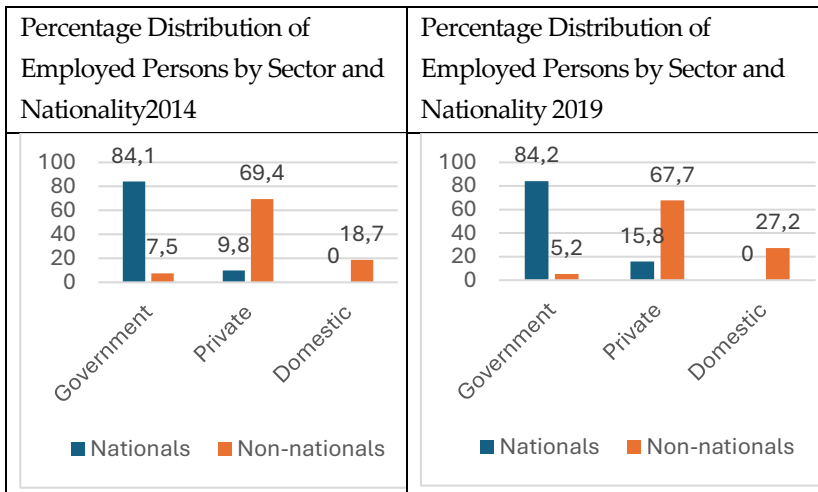




**Figure 1.3:** Non-Kuwaiti pink-collar labour force in each governorate

Source: (Kuwait Population Census by Data, 2021- The Public Authority for Civil Information, Kuwait)

In 2014 and 2018, the percentage distribution of employed Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti workers by sector was as follows:



**Figure 1.4:** Percentage distribution of employed Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti workers

Source: Labour Force Survey 2014, published by Central Statistical Bureau, Kuwait

Source: (GLMM, 2021)

It is evident that the domestic working population of non-nationals are clearly increasing in Kuwait from 18.7 percentage to 27.2 percentage. At the same time, it is also clear that Kuwaiti nationals' percentage of population in the white-collar jobs (Government and Private) are also increasing.

The above graph illustrates the percentage distribution of Kuwaiti workers compared to non-Kuwaitis. As shown, in 2014, 90% of Kuwaitis were employed in government jobs, while only 7% of non-Kuwaitis (expatriates) held positions in the government sector. Notably, Kuwaitis were entirely absent from the domestic (household) sector, whereas a small percentage (10%) of Kuwaitis were employed in the private sector<sup>16</sup>.

In 2015, there were 197,146 Kuwaiti women employed in the government and private sectors, comprising 30% of the total Kuwaiti female population of 658,030. In comparison, 35% of Kuwaiti men were employed in these sectors, out of a total male population of 633,371<sup>17</sup> The labour deficit among natives in the service and private sectors is supplemented by importing labour from Asian countries. Given Kuwait's small local population and abundant oil resources, both Kuwaiti men and women do not necessarily work to meet their basic needs. The government's social security schemes provide free

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<sup>16</sup> *Wasta* is the Arab colloquial for influence implying connections with people in power.

<sup>17</sup> Population Publication, 2015, PACI, website: <https://www.paci.gov.kw>

healthcare, education, housing, and more. As a result, Kuwaiti households typically employ labour for household chores, including nannies for childcare and drivers, rather than performing these tasks themselves.

Most men in Kuwait are engaged in white-collar work, while women are increasingly found in front desk jobs in government departments and private offices. The jobs typically chosen by Kuwaiti women are often non-manual and do not require manual labour or advanced intellectual skills. This is not to argue that women in Kuwait do not qualify for technical white-collar jobs. However, the percentage of local women's engagement with such jobs is dismal.<sup>18</sup> A small percentage of native women (37.6%) are in professional or technical occupations, while 48.5% are employed in clerical and related areas. Only 2.1% of native women are engaged in the service industry.

Kuwait's patriarchal culture and conservative interpretation of Islam can complicate women's rights, despite efforts to reduce discrimination [Breslin and Kelly: 2010]. The commercial export of oil has led to significant transnational migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Kuwait. Foreign investment in the GCC has increased significantly over the years, primarily due to the region's wealth generated from oil exports.

### **Patterns of Pink-collar Migration to Kuwait: 1965-2015**

In recent years, migration to Kuwait and the broader Gulf region has been heavily influenced by the oil industry's growth and profitability.

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<sup>18</sup> Sanad and Tessler (1988) discuss the economic orientations of Kuwaiti women in detail. Khalaf and Alkobaisi (1999) discuss the persistence among Gulf nationals of negative social attitudes towards female participation in the labor force. Refer to Gokarikel and McLarney (2010) for a further insight on Muslim women and Islamic culture Industry.

Over time, foreign investors have actively participated in and benefited from this strategically important area. For instance, foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries increased dramatically from just under \$2 billion in 2001 to over \$20 billion in 2005. Currently, around \$1 trillion in infrastructure investments are in progress, and this figure could reach up to \$3 trillion by the end of the decade. This is in addition to the significant monetary surplus that the region consistently generates.

The migrant population in the GCC also saw substantial growth, rising from 9 million in 1990 to 13 million in 2005, marking a 49% increase, according to the UN Population Division Report from 2006. However, despite these significant trends, the quantitative data available for analysing migration flows to the GCC has been somewhat inconsistent and incomplete.

Migration to Kuwait and the broader Gulf region is primarily driven by the demand for and supply of oil. This dynamic has been described as 'yielding extraordinary dividends to the GCC states.' The revenue generated from oil has spurred demand for various development projects, including infrastructure, construction, and modernization initiatives.

Over the past few decades, the global market has evolved in complex ways, involving intricate production processes that start in low-wage areas and culminate in the sale of products in advanced capitalist countries. The Gulf region plays a critical role in this global economic system, not only as a producer of goods but also due to its substantial financial surpluses. This unique position enhances its influence in the global economy, making it a central hub for both production and investment.

The Gulf's economic contributions and its integration into the global market significantly influence the development of states and social classes within the GCC region, underscoring their importance on the world stage. However, the Middle East and North Africa have undergone substantial changes in recent years. The widespread adoption of neoliberal policies across most countries in the region has had profound effects. These policies have resulted in mass impoverishment for much of the population while simultaneously concentrating wealth in the hands of a select few.

One noticeable outcome of these changes is the expansion of the 'informal' sector in Arab economies. This sector includes small and medium-sized businesses and intermediary agencies that operate with minimal regulation, allowing them to bypass bureaucratic hurdles. The impact of these neoliberal policies varies across the region. They have not only strengthened the largest business conglomerates and ruling families within the GCC states but also widened the gap between these states and other Middle Eastern countries. From a regional perspective, neoliberalism has enriched local business elites and solidified the GCC's dominant position in the area.

In the GCC countries, including Kuwait, there was a plan to boost the economy, but the local workforce lacked the necessary skills to support this growth. The job market in Kuwait and the GCC is highly divided between the public and private sectors, as well as between local and migrant workers. Most highly skilled foreign workers take up jobs in the private sector, while local citizens often hold higher positions in the government sector. There's also a significant shortage of local workers in the service industry, so migrant labour fills this gap. Men from other countries often work in construction, while migrant women are mainly employed in housekeeping and care roles.

Over the past few decades, specific ‘worker categories’ have become well-established, leading to the creation of illegal recruitment channels. This system has evolved into a complex and winding ‘maze’, posing potential risks to individuals seeking to move to another country for work. In other words, the process of hiring labour under the sponsorship system not only meets the demand for workers in various sectors but also serves to fulfill a pre-set ‘quota’ of workers. These quotas are often arranged by agents and sub-agents operating in both the home and host countries.

So, the job market isn’t just divided between public and private sectors or local and migrant workers; it’s also segmented by gender and informal employment. Back in the early 1980s, the migration of women had a significant impact on both their home countries and the countries they moved to. Many studies have investigated the causes of migration. For women from the Indian subcontinent coming to the Gulf region, this movement is not new but rather a revival of a tradition that dates back to the 1930s.

The tradition of migration in the Gulf region has been growing, partly due to a shortage of Arab workers. Migration to the Gulf dates back to the early 1900s and was neither ‘natural’ nor ‘accidental’. It was heavily influenced by deliberate decisions and support from colonial powers. British foreign policies and oil companies played a significant role in shaping this migration, as they needed a reliable workforce to support the burgeoning oil industry. As the region grew wealthier and more powerful due to oil, it required a larger and more diverse workforce to sustain its development. This is how the tradition of migration was shaped and evolved over time.

In the past 10-15 years, there has been a growing demand for jobs such as domestic helpers, cleaners, babysitters and salon workers. Despite requiring minimal education, these roles have become increasingly