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Empirical Evidence on Sexual and Gender Based Violence Faced by **Sri Lankan Migrant Female Domestic Workers**



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Authored by

Bilesha Weeraratne and Yashora Gunawardena



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Bilesha Weeraratne

Bilesha Weeraratne is a Research Fellow and Head of Migration and Urbanisation Policy Research at the IPS. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University, New Jersey, USA. Prior to moving to the United States, she worked at the IPS and at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Her research interests include internal and international migration, climate mobility, urbanisation, the economics of education, labour economics, economic development, econometrics and economic modeling. She has collaborated and served as a consultant to prominent international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Bilesha holds a BA in Economics from the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, an MA in Economics from Rutgers University, USA and an MPhil and PhD in Economics from the City University of New York, USA.

bilesha@ips.lk



Yashora Gunawardena

Yashora Gunawardena is a Research Assistant working on migration and urbanisation policy research at IPS. She holds a BA in Economics with first-class honours from the Department of Economics and Statistics, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka.

Her research interests include migration and remittances, inward migration and tourism, urbanisation and internal migration, migration and development, labour markets, women and workforce, skills and education. She is currently pursuing Corporate Level qualifications at the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka.

yashora@ips.lk

Please address orders to:

Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka

100/20, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka

Tel: 94 11 2143100, Fax: 94 11 2665065

Email: ips@ips.lk, Website: www.ips.lk

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Abstract

Female migrant workers experience Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) related vulnerabilities in the countries of their destination. However, there is limited understanding and empirical evidence of the extent of SGBV experienced by Sri Lankan female migrant workers in recent years. Using data from complaints lodged at the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) by migrant female domestic workers, in an approach that combines the world of work and human rights frameworks, this study conducts a qualitative analysis to provide empirical evidence on when, where and how female migrant workers are affected by SGBV. Empirical evidence provides a better understanding of various nuances of SGBV and helps formulate appropriate recommendations along four main pillars which are Pillar 1: Pre-emptive risk identification mechanisms and awareness raising mechanisms; Pillar 2: Efficient and speedy reporting mechanisms; Pillar 3: Effective support structures for positive coping mechanisms and Pillar 4: Binding penalty measures to prevent further incidence of SGBV.

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	4
2.1 Theoretical Framework	4
2.2 Empirical Evidence	4
3. Approach	9
4. Methodology and Data	11
4.1 Methodology	11
4.2 Data	11
5. Contextual Overview	14
5.1 Migrant FDWs in the Middle Eastern Socio-culture	14
5.2 International Protection Framework and Labour Laws in Middle East	15
5.3 SLBFE's SGBV Complaint Handling Environment in Sri Lanka	17
6. Thematic Analysis	20
6.1 Compromising Safety and Privacy	20
6.2 Violation of Basic Human Needs	22
6.3 Sexual Harassment	27
6.4 Physical and Mental Harassment	30
6.5 Inadequate Rest and Excessive Workload	35
6.6 Deception and Forced Labour	38
6.7 Non-payment of Wages	39
6.8 Communication Issues	42
7. Overarching Themes	44
7.1 Continuum of Violence	44
7.2 Economic Realities	44
7.3 Sector Informality	45
7.4 Immigration Control	45

7.5 Diversity of Perpetrators	46
7.6 Capacity to Handle SGBV	49
7.7 Inquiry and Conciliation	49
7.8 Role of Foreign Agency	50
8 Summary and Recommendations	52
8.1 Summary	52
8.2 Conclusion	53
8.3 Recommendations	54
Annex	60
References	67

List of Tables

Table 1: Summary of Gulf Countries Ratifying CEDAW, C189 and C190	16
Table 2: Summary of Labour Laws for Domestic Workers in the Middle East	17
Table 3: Summary of Issues on Compromising Safety and Privacy	22
Table 4: Summary of Violation of Basic Human Needs	26
Table 5: Summary of Sexual Harassment	30
Table 6: Summary of Physical and Mental Harassment	34
Table 7: Summary of Inadequate Rest and Excessive Workload	37
Table 8: Summary of Deception and Forced Labor	39
Table 9: Summary of Non-payment of Wages	41
Table 10: Summary of Communication Barriers	43
Table 11: Diversity of Perpetrators	48

List of Figures

Figure 1: Migrants' Complaints: January - November 2024	12
Figure 2: Process of Conciliation at SLBFE	19

List of Annexes

Annex 1: Summary of KIIs Conducted	60
Annex 2: Descriptive Statistics of Cases	61
Annex 3: Summary of Complaint Handling Mechanism and Solution	63

Abbreviations

CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CMS	Complaints Management System
CS Lanka-SEDEC	Caritas Sri Lanka Social and Economic Development Centre
FDW	Female Domestic Workers
FR	Foreign Relations
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GHN	General Hospital Negombo
HR	Human Resource
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
LKR	Sri Lankan Rupees
N/A	Not Available
NOK	Next of Kin
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
SAR	Saudi Arabian Riyals
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SIM Card	Subscriber Identity Module Card
SL	Sri Lanka
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	United States Dollar
WHO	World Health Organization
WHS	Work Health and Safety

1. Introduction

Female migrant workers are often identified as a highly vulnerable segment of the population. Among them, female domestic workers are extremely susceptible to vulnerabilities including exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, trafficking, forced labour, poor working conditions and wage theft. An act of violence transforms into gender-based violence if it is committed against a person or group, based on their gender and/or socially defined gender roles. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support (IFRC PS) (2015, p. 22) defines gender-based violence (GBV) as “an umbrella term for any harmful act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to a woman, man, girl or boy on the basis of their gender” and notes that “GBV includes but is not limited to sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced or early marriage, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation and abuse and denial of resources, opportunities and services”. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General recommendation No. 35 (2017) on GBV against women, defines GBV as “violence which is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately”, and that “it constitutes a violation of their human rights”. It further states that “such violence takes multiple forms, including acts or omissions intended or likely to cause or result in death or physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, threats of such acts, harassment, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty”. Similarly, UNHCR (2011, p6) defines Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) as “any harmful act that is perpetrated against one person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. As such, while both terms – GBV and SGBV, have similar meanings and can be used interchangeably, this study mainly uses the term SGBV.

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Migrant Female Domestic Workers (FDW)¹ face a continuum of abuse related to SGBV, stemming from their vulnerability as migrant workers who are away from their families and home countries and who often live and work at their employers’ homes. Moreover, as noted by GAATW (2019), migrant FDWs’ characteristics of often coming from backgrounds of high indebtedness, “extreme economic pressure to provide for families” and socio-cultural barriers increase the risk of SGBV. Many Sri Lankan FDWs migrate due to dire financial conditions, including high household debt, lack of employment opportunities, and the need to support dependents, which makes them economically dependent on remittances

¹ The terms migrant FDW and FDW are used interchangeably.

(CS Lanka-SEDEC, 2012). This economic dependency increases their vulnerability to abuse, as fear of losing income or being repatriated often deters them from reporting violence or escaping abusive environments. Furthermore, systemic issues such as the Kafala Sponsorship System and informal work settings further reduce the bargaining power of FDWs, increasing their exposure to SGBV within the very structure of their employment. Thus, SGBV faced by FDWs is not merely an outcome of gender discrimination but also a reflection of the unequal economic relationships embedded within the migration and domestic work process (CS Lanka-SEDEC, 2012). Therefore, protecting FDW from SGBV requires a broad support structure spanning various stakeholders across both countries of origin and destination. To garner such support, it is important to establish the severity and reasons behind SGBV faced by FDWs through empirical evidence. In this setting, this study aims to answer three research questions: i. How are migrant FDWs affected by SGBV while abroad? ii. Why are migrant FDWs affected by SGBV while abroad? and iii. How can Sri Lanka minimize migrant FDWs vulnerability to SGBV? The study is based on 42 purposively selected complaints made by migrant FDWs in 2024, and eight Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The analysis adopts a thematic approach and finds that several key factors contribute to the vulnerability of FDWs to SGBV while abroad, which are exacerbated by structural, social, and individual factors that interact in complex ways. The findings show that despite the existence of a well-established and a well-functioning institutional support mechanism in Sri Lanka and an equally strong international framework to protect and support migrant workers, SGBV continues to be a pressing issue faced by Sri Lankan FDWs.

The SGBV experienced by FDWs is nuanced and includes violations of basic human needs such as food, accommodation and rest, violation of human rights to safety, privacy and dignity; exposure to physical, mental and sexual harassment; being deprived of communication and due wages on time and exposure to forced or bonded labour and deception. SGBV on FDW is inflicted by a large group of perpetrators. These issues faced are interconnected and form a continuum of issues, impacted by the socio-economic background of FDWs. Similarly, the context in the countries of destination with regards to the socio-cultural background on gender, informality of the domestic sector and the immigration rules around the Kafala System further contributes to exposure of FDWs to SGBV. The evidence shows that timely and necessary action within the existing framework by the relevant stakeholders would be able to prevent initial issues escalating to full-blown cases of SGBV and ensure optimal resolutions for FDWs. One of the key contributions

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of this study is its approach to examining the issue of SGBV from the combined lens of world of work and human rights. Additionally, this study's empirical analysis relies on a SLBFE's complaint files- a data source not exploited in related studies thus far. Moreover, the data is current and reflects the nuances of SGBV in the post-pandemic context. By extracting valuable data in each complaint from the time the complaint was lodged to the point of resolution, a wealth of in-depth information serves as the foundation of this detailed study. This enables us not

only to highlight the issues faced by FDWs, but also to uncover the challenges in reaching a solution to these issues. Understanding these challenges is important to recommend

practical solutions. Some recommendations emerging from the analysis are grouped under four pillars. They are recommendations along Pillar 1: Pre-emptive risk identification mechanisms and awareness raising mechanisms; Pillar 2: Efficient and speedy reporting mechanisms; Pillar 3: Effective support structures for positive coping mechanisms and Pillar 4: Binding penalty measures to prevent further incidence of SGBV. Along these pillars, the report shows that FDWs, recruitment agents, employers and other stakeholders all have a role to play in minimizing SGBV and supporting those who have experienced SGBV.

This study focuses specifically on FDWs employed in the Middle East, who represent one of the most vulnerable groups within the broader category of female migrant workers originating from Sri Lanka. Similarly, the analysis focuses only on women, even though SGBV is not limited to women. While this report analyses the complaints related to SGBV encountered by FDWs, it is important to highlight that most migrants experience positive outcomes with migration, and a relatively smaller share experiences SGBV. The report is based on qualitative data that is purposively selected to bring out the complexities of SGBV. Given that the data used in the study does not represent the entire Sri Lankan migrant FDW population, these findings should not be generalized to the average FDW. However, these findings are important to understand the nuances of SGBV among those who have experienced the same.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the literature on SGBV experienced by Sri Lankan migrant workers, while Section 3 discusses alternative points of view and approaches to analyse SGBV issues, followed by an introduction of methodology and the data in Section 4. Section 5 sets FDWs and SGBV in the socio-cultural and labour context in the Middle East and the complaint handling environment at the SLBFE. Section 6 presents the findings along the various nuanced themes of SGBV faced by Sri Lankan migrant FDWs, while Section 7 offers a deeper understanding of these challenges and the gaps in the existing support structures along various overarching theme. Section 8 concludes the report with a summary, conclusion and practical recommendations to reduce the vulnerability of migrant FDWs to SGBV and improve their protection.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

When focusing on SGBV, literature adopts several alternative frameworks/approaches. One is the survivor-centred approach, which assumes “everything begins with the experiences of the survivor. These experiences determine the needs, and the needs determine the services required” (IFRC PS, 2015, p. 8). The “do not harm” principle in this survivor-centred approach in the psychosocial support of SGBV survivors prioritizes confidentiality and safety. Hence this approach emphasizes the need for non-judgmental care, highlighting the harm caused by victim-blaming questions such as, “Why did you go there alone?” or “Why did you wear those clothes?”. IFRC PS (2015) highlights that these questions perpetuate prejudices and shift blame onto the survivor, undermining their dignity. Alternatively, the human rights approach interprets diverse aspects of SGBV as different human rights violations – for example, the right to life, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, and freedom from discrimination and the right to safety and security. Council of Europe (n.d.) used this approach to explore how gender-based violence intersects with human rights, particularly focusing on marginalized groups and to align with the understanding of systemic violence and the need for legal protection, ensuring that the survivors’ dignity and rights are prioritized in the context of gender-based violence. SGBV is also approached from a public health approach since it affects a large proportion of the population and/or are unequally distributed. In the Public Health approach, SGBV is analysed through how social factors (such as class, racialization, disability, or gender) influence health and access to support for SGBV survivors (Goicolea, 2023). By using a public health framework to examine healthcare responses to GBV, Goicolea (2023) highlights the value of systems thinking in service delivery. Moreover, SGBV is also approached from the point of view of the world of work within Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) frameworks, also referred to as Work Health and Safety (WHS) frameworks. Cox (2024, p.7) notes that SGBV can be better addressed with an “upstream approach that relies not only on recourse for individual workers but also on concerted efforts to nip such violence and harassment in the bud by leveraging the prevention structures and mechanisms offered by WHS frameworks”. Thus, the WHS framework is considered to “allow proactive, systematic, collective, inclusive and publicly enforceable approaches to prevention” of SGBV. Therefore, the study by Cox (2024) adopts the WHS framework to explore the role of employers, organizations, and policies in preventing and addressing GBV and harassment in the workplace.

2.2 Empirical Evidence

The experiences of Sri Lankan FDWs have been focused in previous studies². These existing studies reveal significant patterns of abuse, exploitation, and systemic neglect, highlighting the multifaceted challenges faced by these workers, ranging from physical and sexual violence to financial exploitation and psychological trauma.

² This review is limited to important studies focusing on FDWs from Sri Lanka.

Prevalence of physical and sexual violence: Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) studied SGBV using cross-sectional data from medico-legal case records made to the Judicial Medical Office at the District General Hospital Negombo (GHN) in the Gampaha District. Their dataset consists of forensic medical examination data of returning Sri Lankan FDWs who reported abuse while employed in the Middle East. Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) underscore that sexual abuse was reported by five out of the 20 women in their sample, three of whom became pregnant, and one was coerced into commercial sex work. These authors show that physical violence was prevalent, with 60% of participants showing signs of injury, including permanent disabilities and disfiguring wounds. Injuries often resulted from repetitive violence, particularly in the form of contusions, abrasions, and lacerations on the upper limbs, head, and neck. Moreover, they have identified that female employers or heads of households as the primary perpetrators.

Psychological mistreatment and labour exploitation: In addition to physical and sexual violence, the study revealed that psychological mistreatment, including verbal abuse and threats, affected nearly two-thirds of the participants. Over 80% of participants, in their sample, had experienced excessive work hours without rest or break days, and other forms of punishment included deprivation of food and water. Wage violations, including non-payment and underpayment, were reported by more than three-quarters of their workers. Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) further note that psychological trauma was widespread, with 80% of participants having experienced these issues. These findings by Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) underscore the multiple forms of abuse-physical, financial, verbal, and emotional-experienced by domestic workers, reflecting the broader patterns of exploitation and neglect identified by the World Health Organization (WHO). Similar to the patterns of abuse documented by Human Rights Watch (2007), these findings by Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017), also demonstrate the deeply embedded similarities in the patterns of physical and violent abuse, psychological mistreatment, sexual exploitation, and forced labour that workers experienced. However, despite being valuable, Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris's (2017) findings are debatable due to their data interpretation and presentation. For instance, when Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) provide percentages based on a sample size of only 20 returnee women migrant workers, the findings have limited validity. Similarly, when Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris (2017) quantify that over 80% of participants experienced excessive work hours without rest or break days, and other forms of punishment including deprivation of food and water, they are referring to 16 out of 20 of their respondents.

The study by CS Lanka-SEDEC (2012) is based on primary data collected from a purposive sample of 122 affected and returned migrant workers selected from six districts representing both high and low labour-sending regions in Sri Lanka. It provides additional insight into the broader challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers, particularly those involving exploitation during the migration process itself. The study found that most migrant FDWs experienced workplace harassment. Common complaints included a lack of rest days (74%), no time for sleep (56%), unpaid wages (34%), verbal abuse (65%), restricted communication (61.5%), and food deprivation (44%).

Health vulnerabilities linked to poor working conditions: Migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, face considerable health-related challenges, often exacerbated by poor working conditions and lack of access to healthcare. The report by the ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives (2013) sought to identify current migrant worker grievances and complaints to review mediatory mechanisms run by various institutions and to evaluate deficiencies. The report highlights that health-related complaints rank as one of the most frequent issues reported by these workers, with some developing illnesses upon arrival at their workplaces, while others had pre-existing conditions that were concealed during recruitment.

Wage-related exploitation and contract manipulation: The same study by ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives (2013) shows that some employers withhold wages during the first few months to create a “reserve” in case a worker runs away, a practice often advised by recruitment agencies, while a “double contract system,” where workers are made to sign two contracts with different wage rates, often leads to wage discrepancies and exploitation. This report further shows that forceful employment-beyond contract periods, being left stranded without employment, and breaches of contract terms are other frequently reported issues. ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives (2013) also underscores that low-income employers in the host countries are a major contributory factor for wage-related problems, such as non-payment or underpayment.

Building on these findings Weerasinghe and Wijewantha (2023) conducted a study between late 2020 and 2022 using primary data collected from a national-level survey of 2218 FDWs. Their findings highlight a broader range of challenges faced by Sri Lankan FDWs in the Gulf countries, including language and communication barriers, non-payment of wages, violation of foreign employment agreements, long and exhaustive working hours, poor and unsafe working conditions, deterioration of health due to workplace conditions, lack of access to basic needs, and experiences of physical and sexual harassment. Nonetheless, despite their large sample size, Weerasinghe and Wijewantha’s (2023) data collection process has continued for an extremely long duration of two years. This raises concerns about the validity of the cross-sectional characteristics of their data. When data is collected over such a duration, the time dynamics can create a different dimension of variation in the dataset. As such, the validity of their analysis is undermined by the extended duration of primary data collection.

Legal and social precarity: In addition to the commonly reported issues faced by Sri Lankan FDWs, recent studies provide deeper insights into the structural, legal, and social factors that facilitate their exploitation. Kouta et al. (2021), highlight that the perpetrators capitalize on FDWs’ precarious legal, social, and economic positions to exploit migrant domestic workers and this leads to sexual violence. This study is based on qualitative, in-depth, individual and group interviews with 15 FDWs from the Philippines and Sri Lanka working in the Republic of Cyprus who have experienced work-based sexual violence. In the analysis Kouta et al. (2021) employed a descriptive thematic analysis approach to explore experiences and responses, and show that FDWs face significant barriers to seeking justice, including fear of job loss, deportation and further discrimination from law enforcement; racism; discriminatory legal and immigration systems; and lack of support

networks. Despite these challenges, these women have actively attempted to resist and confront the abuse by adopting various strategies such as avoiding situations with the perpetrator, non-confrontational refusals, and altering their behaviour to resist advances.

Living arrangements and employer control: Furthermore, Kouta et al. (2021) note that employers' control over workers' movements, often facilitated by living arrangements stipulated in employment contracts, increases vulnerability to abuse. The authors note that many women lived close to their employers, sometimes in separate quarters, allowing 24/7 access and heightened risk. Moreover, Kouta et al. (2021) note that male employers, particularly elderly men, sometimes expect sexual favours as part of domestic work, with some viewing the workers as substitutes for wives or as prostitutes due to their economic instability.

Structural flaws in the recruitment process and power imbalances: The study by CS Lanka-SEDEC (2012) revealed that harassment experienced during the migration process of female domestic migrant workers is rooted in various forms of exploitation, beginning with difficulties in obtaining documents and information from agents. This study also shows that the Kafala System ties workers to sponsors, restricting their rights, and underscores that training for FDWs is insufficient, lacking important information on rights, job skills, and social skills. The authors also highlight that in the host countries, workers face further mistreatment from agents, with systems offering little protection against abuse and rights violations. These findings by CS Lanka-SEDEC (2012) are consistent with broader patterns of abuse identified in the literature, particularly concerning the power imbalance between employers and FDWs, where workers are left with limited avenues to report violations or seek redress.

The literature reveals a clear pattern of SGBV and exploitation faced by Sri Lankan migrant FDWs in the Middle East. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable gap in studies that focus on more recent data, particularly those examining the post-pandemic period. Research into the post-pandemic experiences of Sri Lankan migrant FDWs is crucial, as the pandemic, the financial crises and the related recovery processes have significantly heightened their vulnerabilities with economic hardships, job insecurity, and financial pressures. These have likely intensified abuse and exploitation in the countries of destination, making it essential to understand how these workers are coping in such a challenging environment. However, the data used for analysis by Wickramage, De Silva and Peiris (2017) pertains to the period 2014-2015, while Weerasinghe and Wijewantha (2023) base their analysis on data related to those repatriated to Sri Lanka before 2019. Similarly, the valuable analyses by CS Lanka-SEDEC (2012) and the ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives (2013) are now over a decade old. Moreover, despite being a relatively new publication, the data used by Kouta et al., (2021) was collected in 2013-2014. As such, there is a critical need to establish

The pandemic, the financial crises and the related recovery processes have significantly heightened their vulnerabilities with economic hardships, job insecurity, and financial pressures.

empirical evidence related to the post-pandemic period. The current study fills this research gap by relying on data collected in 2024 for the analysis. The use of more recent data enables us to compare if the nuances and severity of SGBV have changed over the years.

Another key limitation of existing studies on SGBV in Sri Lanka is the mismatch between the data used and the analysis adopted. For instance, as discussed before, authors have inadvertently generalized findings from a small sample to all FDWs (Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris, 2017; Kouta, et al., 2021). On the contrary, Weerasinghe and Wijewantha (2023) base their findings on a much larger and likely representative sample of migrant workers of 2218 respondents from the Gulf countries with at least two years of foreign employment experience before June 30, 2019. However, as discussed earlier, the excessively long data collection period of two years raises concerns about the validity of the cross-sectional characteristics of data, as they may be muddled with time, creating a different dimension of variation in the dataset. Compared to these studies, the current study relies on a rich qualitative data source with 42 compliant files and 8 KIIs, and adopts an appropriate methodology to analyse data with a thematic analysis.

3. Approach

As evident from the foregone literature review, SGBV is inflicted on FDW by individuals related to their employment, often as part of a recurring pattern of behaviour. Accordingly, this study adopts a combined world of work and human rights approach when analysing the SGBV experiences of migrant FDWs. The concept of the world of work encompasses all aspects of a person's working life, whether paid or unpaid, formal or informal, and includes not only the workplace itself, but also the home, public places, employer provided housing and commuting to and from work, to name a few. Workplace violence is correlated with other forms of violence that are directed toward a person's ability to work. Within the workplace context, violence can occur directly at work or outside of it, affecting employees' capacity to perform their jobs effectively. A safe work environment can be achieved if all the stakeholders employ the necessary measures to solve the issues at hand. Further to the concept of the world of work, workplace culture is important in enabling the reporting of violence by victims and providing much-needed support to prevent blame-shifting.

Moreover, SGBV has an impact on an employee's health, mental well-being, performance, turnover rate, and job satisfaction level. The human rights framework provides the basis on which SGBV can be addressed through international human rights law and state obligations. The foundational legal instruments for protection against violence and gender equality include the CEDAW, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. States have a legal obligation to prevent and appropriately respond to SGBV through the adoption of laws and policies that ensure accountability. This encompasses the protection against violence, the duty to protect, the duty to provide access to justice, and the duty to ensure legal remedies and support services for survivors. Non-discrimination, a key principle in human rights law, requires equal protection and access to justice, irrespective of gender. Non-discrimination, which ensures that all individuals, regardless of gender, receive equal protection and access to justice, is a core principle of human rights law. It ensures that victims have access to justice through legal machinery and access to necessary support services reinforces commitments to the eradication of SGBV and the protection of human rights for all.

In addition to this combination of world of work and human rights frameworks, the analysis is also set in the gendered nature of domestic work, the recruitment culture and practices associated with FDWs, and the socio-cultural context of the countries of destination. Specifically, in the historical context, domestic work was viewed as a feminine role associated with caring and nurturing, which makes it a gendered occupation. Over time, FDW has been made a female-dominated sector due to historical context, cultural norms, economic factors, gender stereotypes,

Over time, FDW has been made a female-dominated sector due to historical context, cultural norms, economic factors, gender stereotypes, labour market segmentation, and the work-life balance that pull women into this sector.

labour market segmentation, and the work-life balance that pull women into this sector. Along with the feminine characteristics involved with female domestic work, there is an expectation by the part of employers and their household members that FDWs need to be submissive and inferior to all other workers/ persons in the household. Such social attitudes often devalue domestic work, and further marginalize FDWs.

Accordingly, this study is positioned at the intersection of the approaches of world of work and human rights as well as the gendered nature of domestic work, the recruitment culture and practices associated with FDWs and the socio-cultural context of the countries of destination.

4. Methodology and Data

4.1 Methodology

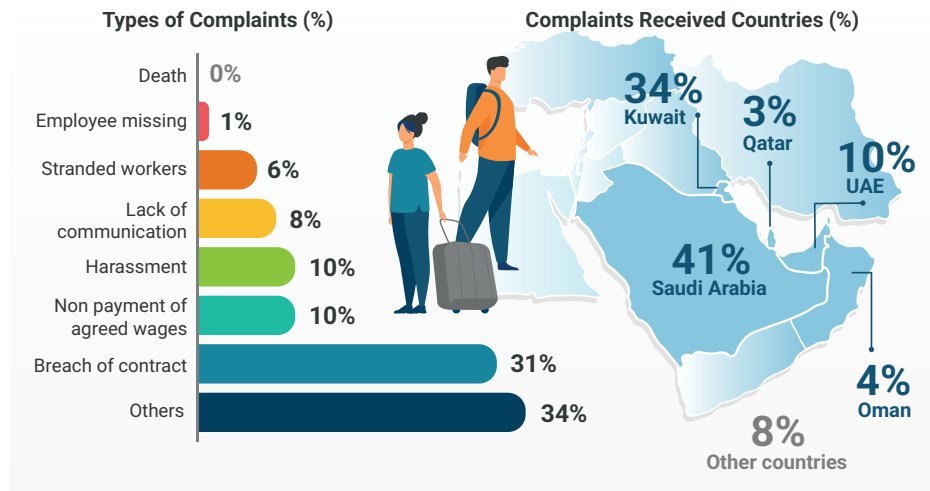
The methodology of analysis adopted in this study is a thematic analysis within the combined frameworks of the world of work and human rights, set within gender and socio-cultural dimensions of recruitment and employment, where the qualitative data are analysed along key themes emerging from the data. In conducting the thematic analysis, six key steps are followed: 1. Familiarization, which involves going through all complaint files to understand the data; 2. Coding, which involves identifying recurring concepts in complaint files and coding them with key words; 3. Generating themes, which involves grouping key words to develop key themes; 4. Reviewing themes; 5. Defining and naming themes and 6. Analysis.

4.2 Data

The qualitative data used for the analysis consisted primarily of two types. Firstly, KIIs were conducted with SLBFE officials to get a broad understanding of the nature of SGBV issues faced by migrant workers. Following discussions with the officials from various departments at the SLBFE, the Conciliation Division was selected as the primary department for conducting the KIIs. The Conciliation Division plays a central role in addressing a broad spectrum of grievances from migrant workers. It serves as a critical platform for workers to report complaints related to human rights violations, including issues such as sexual, physical, and mental abuse, mistreatment, poor working conditions, non-payment of wages, lack of communication, and other related concerns. Six KIIs were conducted with SLBFE officials involved in handling complaints. Additionally, an inquiry was observed during the conciliation stage, where both the complainant (husband of the relevant FDW) and the local agent participated. Subsequently, a KII was done with the local recruitment agent and the relevant FDW's husband at the SLBFE premises. Each KII, lasting between 30 to 40 minutes, was audio-recorded using an encrypted digital audio recorder. The audio files were then fully transcribed, checked for accuracy against field notes, and redacted to protect participant confidentiality. KII data was collected from August to September 2024.

Secondly, to get an in-depth understanding of the issue, information from complaints lodged in the Complaints Management System (CMS) of the SLBFE was sourced. In 2024 there were a total of 6,705 complaints by migrant workers between January and November. Among them, 31% were related to breach of employment contract, while 10% were harassment, and another 10% were non-payment of wages (See Figure 1 below). It is important to note that this classification of SLBFE is based on the main issue faced/complained by migrant workers. However, within a complaint file, multiple types of complaints can be found. Among all countries, 41% of total complaints were reported from migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, while 34% were from Kuwait and 10% were from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Moreover, for the full year from January to December 2024, a total of 7,448 complaints were made, and among them 5699 (76.5%) were made by FDWs and 5,662 (76.0%) were made by FDWs in the Middle East.

Figure 1: Migrants' Complaints: January - November 2024



Source: SLBFE Administrative Data (January - November 2024).

In the interest of the scope of the study, complaint files were purposively selected to reflect diverse nuances of SGBV faced by FDWs in the Middle East, only complaint files related to FDWs employed in the Middle East were considered for the analysis. In the first step of purposive sampling, complaints that were lodged or ongoing between January to October 2024 were shortlisted. Following an initial review of all complaint files, the next step involved selecting complaint files originating from Kuwait and UAE, and Saudi Arabia, with an intentional oversampling of cases from Saudi Arabia, to better reflect the most relevant cases centred around the theme of sexual harassment. The oversampling of Saudi Arabia is consistent with the study's methodology to capture a wider range of experiences. This step involved selection of relevant complaints based on key words identified through the world of work and human rights frameworks and previous literature. The list of keywords adopted from the world of work framework includes health and safety, forced labour, workplace harassment, gender-based violence and harassment, sexual harassment, psychosocial risks, working conditions, freedom of association, equal pay, wage theft and power imbalance (ILO, 1998; ILO, n.d.). Similarly, the list of keywords from the human rights framework include safe and healthy working environments, human dignity and respect, right to rest and leisure, freedom from forced labour, adequate standard of living, non-discrimination, workplace violence, freedom from harassment (physical, psychological, sexual), gender-based harassment, right to equal treatment and right to fair compensation (United Nations, 1948; Vijayakumar and Rajagopal, 2024). Data extraction from SLBFE was done from September to November 2024. This data was retrieved from complaint forms submitted by complainant, the Next of Kin (NOK), on behalf of the migrant worker. One major issue was the absence of information in some fields of the complaint forms, which are reported as Not Available (N/A) in Table 2 below. Hereafter, the term 'case' refers to a complaint file lodged at the SLBFE by a migrant worker or her family member. The combination of qualitative data from the KIIs and complaint files adds greater depth and breadth to the analysis.

In this sample, 28 cases have already been closed, and 14 are ongoing, while most complaints indicated a systemic issue in workplace environments and protection for migrant workers. The FDWs in the purposively selected sample include a diverse range of ages, from young adults in their 20s to older women in their 50s. Most complainants are either in the 30–40 or 40–50 brackets, however there is a notable portion marked N/A (Not available in the complaint form/Not uploaded the complaint form to the system). Additionally, it was noted that victims belonged to various ethnicities, including Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim, reflecting the diversity of Sri Lankan migrant workers and most have originated from diverse districts across Sri Lanka, representing a mix of urban and semi-urban areas like Colombo, Kalutara, Galle, Matara, Gampaha and Kandy, as well as rural regions such as Nuwara Eliya, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, and Hambantota.

Victims might feel more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with female officers, which underscores the importance of increasing their representation in handling such cases.

Most victims were married, highlighting that many female migrant workers take up employment abroad to provide for their families. Husbands were the most common NOK reported, followed by sons and fathers. In many cases, male NOKs served as the primary advocates for the victims, filing complaints and seeking redress. Most cases were handled by female officers who were assigned to cases involving severe physical or sexual harassment. Victims might feel more comfortable discussing sensitive issues with female officers, which underscores the importance of increasing their representation in handling such cases.

5. Contextual Overview

5.1 Migrant FDWs in the Middle Eastern Socio-culture

The recruitment culture for FDWs from Sri Lanka to the Middle East involves a heavy investment by the employer, where an upfront incentive of about USD 1000 – 2000 is paid to the FDW before she takes up employment overseas. This changes the employer-employee dynamic and expectation by the employer that the FDW needs to continue to

Migration governance structure in the Middle East, with the “Kafala” Sponsorship System gives employers much control over migrant domestic workers.

work under any circumstance. Additionally, the migration governance structure in the Middle East, with the “Kafala” Sponsorship System gives employers much control over migrant domestic workers, resulting in workers needing their employers’ permission to change jobs, leave the country, or to get legal help. Moreover, FDWs are employed in highly gendered occupations that uphold traditional gender roles and hierarchies. These traditional gender roles and hierarchies are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context in the Middle East, where they place a relatively low status for women in society.

The place of women in Middle Eastern culture and society is shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal structures, religious traditions, and socio-legal frameworks that often support gender hierarchies. Many Middle Eastern societies follow traditional values where women are expected to prioritize family life, limiting their mobility, independence, and control over decision-making. These expectations are based on the belief that women are naturally better at nurturing. As a result, women are often expected to handle all related activities in the areas of cooking, cleaning, caregiving and household management.

Saudi Arabia provides interesting examples of these gender hierarchies. In the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index, Saudi Arabia ranks 126th out of 146 countries in gender inequality (World Economic Forum, 2024). The conditions for women in Saudi Arabia, regardless of age, are such that they are required to have a male guardian to leave the house, they are not permitted to drive, they cannot vote or be admitted to high political office, and if a woman reports a case of rape, she is also punished. Under Saudi law, the woman is seen as responsible for inappropriate gender mixing and is therefore punished along with her attacker (US Department of State, 2009). These examples prove that Middle Eastern culture and society are highly gendered.

These deeply ingrained patriarchal structures in Middle Eastern households are not just societal, they also contribute to a hierarchical relationship between employer and FDW. The gendered nature of this relationship often results in an environment where FDWs are subject to exploitation and violence, as they are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles of subordination and obedience. Consequently, the SGBV experienced by FDWs is inherently tied to these power imbalances and reflects the broader societal inequalities women face in the Middle Eastern region.

5.2 International Protection Framework and Labour Laws in Middle East

At the international level, there are several important conventions related to migrant workers, domestic workers and workers in general. These are CEDAW, ILO Convention on Domestic Workers (C189), ILO Convention against Violence and Harassment (No. C190), International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, Convention concerning Migration for Employment (No. 97), and Convention concerning Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers (No.143), to name a few.

Among them, ILO Convention C189 runs very parallel to protecting FDWs against the issues they face. Specifically, C189 adopted in 2011 focuses on decent work for domestic workers and aims to ensure the rights and protections of domestic workers worldwide by recognizing the special conditions under which domestic work is carried out, which makes it necessary to supplement the general standards on employment with standards specific to cater to this group of workers. Specific articles of C189 are directly related to protection from SGBV. For instance, Article 2 calls for the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour while Article 5 focuses on measures to ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence. Article 6 underscores the importance of fair terms of employment as well as decent working conditions, and for domestic workers who reside in the household, decent living conditions that respect their privacy. Article 7 of C189 specified that domestic workers are required to be informed, ideally through a written contract, about the type of work to be performed, the wages, method of calculation and periodicity of payments, the normal hours of work, paid annual leave, and daily and weekly rest periods, as well as the provision of food and accommodation, if applicable. At the same time, Article 9 specifies that domestic workers who reside in the household are not obliged to remain in the household or with household members during periods of daily and weekly rest or annual leave. Article 11 and 12 show that domestic workers are entitled to a weekly rest of at least 24 consecutive hours and wages to be paid directly in cash at regular intervals, at least once a month. Article 13 specifies that every domestic worker has the right to a safe and healthy working environment, while Article 17 of C189 focuses on effective and accessible complaint mechanisms and means of ensuring compliance with national laws and regulations for the protection of domestic workers and the development and implementation of measures for labour inspection, enforcement and penalties with due regard for the special characteristics of domestic work, per national laws and regulations. If ratified and implemented, C189 would protect FDWs extremely well from SGBV.

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ILO Convention No. C190, adopted in 2019, goes beyond domestic workers or migrant workers and covers all types of workers. It aims to ensure a world of work free from violence and harassment. While placing human dignity and respect at the core, C190 combines equality and non-discrimination with safety and health at the workplace into a

single framework. As noted by Cox (2024, p. 7), “the Convention calls for Member States to adopt an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach to prevent and address such (violence and harassment) behaviours in the world of work”. The preamble of C190 recognizes the right of everyone to a world of work free from gender-based violence and harassment and recognizes that violence and harassment in the world of work can constitute a human rights violation or abuse, and that they amount to a threat to equal opportunities and decent work. Article 1 of C190 defines GBV and harassment as ‘violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately and includes sexual harassment’. Article 6 focuses on ensuring the right to equality and non-discrimination in employment and occupation, including for women workers, as well as for workers in situations of vulnerability that are disproportionately affected by violence and harassment in the world of work.

Adopted in 1979, the CEDAW, among others, reaffirms faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women. Article 1 notes “discrimination against women” shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, while Article 7 of CEDAW specifies the right to protection of health and safety in working conditions.

Despite the existence of this ideal protective framework to minimize SGBV experienced by FDWs, their impact on actual issues is a function of countries ratifying these conventions. As shown in Table 1 below, while all countries listed below have ratified CEDAW, none of them have ratified either C189 or C190. The absence of ratification makes it harder to push for greater responsibility of the countries of destination towards protecting FDWs.

Table 1: Summary of Gulf Countries Ratifying CEDAW, C189 and C190

Country	Year of Ratification		
	CEDAW	C189	C190
Saudi Arabia	2000	Not yet	Not yet
UAE	2004	Not yet	Not yet
Qatar	2009	Not yet	Not yet
Kuwait	1994	Not yet	Not yet
Bahrain	2002	Not yet	Not yet
Oman	2006	Not yet	Not yet

Source: Authors' compilation based on ILO NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards.

Instead, these countries have introduced their own versions of labour laws. As detailed in Table 2 below, many of the countries in the Middle East have introduced specific labour laws for domestic workers. These laws were designed to provide legal protection and ensure better working conditions for domestic workers. However, despite these legal frameworks, the enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent, often leaving FDWs vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. For instance, domestic workers, while entitled to breaks and wages, must continue to work abnormally long hours without overtime. Despite labour laws, the

employers confiscate workers' passports and restrict their movements and ability to seek help. Moreover, in addition to labour laws being unclear, there was limited implementation, enforcement and oversight, which together contribute to the continuation of situations of vulnerability faced by migrant workers.

Table 2: Summary of Labour Laws for Domestic Workers in the Middle East

Country	Labour Laws for Domestic Workers	Year Introduced
Saudi Arabia	Ministerial Decision No. 310 of 1434 regulating the employment of domestic workers	2013
UAE	Federal Law No. 10 of 2017 on Domestic Workers	2017
Qatar	Law No. 15 of 2017 on Domestic Workers	2017
Kuwait	Ministerial Decree No.6 of 2015 Regarding Domestic Worker	2015
Bahrain	Law No. 36 of 2012 promulgating the Labour Law for the Private Sector. Domestic workers can only benefit from certain provisions.	2012
Oman	Ministerial Regulation No. 189 of 2004 on Labour Rules and Conditions for Domestic Employees.	2004
Jordan	Regulation No. 90 of 2009 (Regulation of Domestic Workers, Chefs, Gardeners and the Like for the Year 2009)	2009

Source: Authors' tabulation based on ILO (2021).

5.3 SLBFE's SGBV Complaint Handling Environment in Sri Lanka

Given the challenges faced by FDWs in the Middle East, it is crucial to understand how complaints of SGBV are handled when workers return to Sri Lanka or seek help while abroad. In Sri Lanka, migrant workers' complaints are mainly processed by the SLBFE. Here, complaints can be lodged by registered workers or their representatives at SLBFE's Head Office, local branch offices, or diplomatic missions, through in-person visits, calls to hotlines, email, or through an online portal. As such, the SLBFE has provided wide accessibility for registered migrant workers to seek support when in need. For those migrant workers who have not registered their migration with the SLBFE, their complaints are managed by the Consular Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs³.

At the SLBFE, the Conciliation Section/ Complaint Settlement Unit plays a pivotal role in resolving in-service complaints from migrant workers. It is divided into two units: Conciliation I, which handles cases from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and Conciliation II, which covers all other countries. These officers attached to each unit manage all inquiries related to complaints received from the complaint-receiving unit and contact the relevant parties

3. Other mechanisms by civil society and non-governmental organizations are not discussed here as they are beyond the scope of this study.

The SLBFE has provided wide accessibility for registered migrant workers to seek support when in need.

to address the inquiries. The Conciliation Division accepts complaints from or on behalf of migrant workers, focusing on resolving disputes that can be addressed through mediation and negotiation. In addition to the Conciliation Section, the Foreign Relations (FR) section at the SLBFE also played a role in handling complaints by stepping in when issues escalate beyond mediation and require legal action, such as imprisonment.

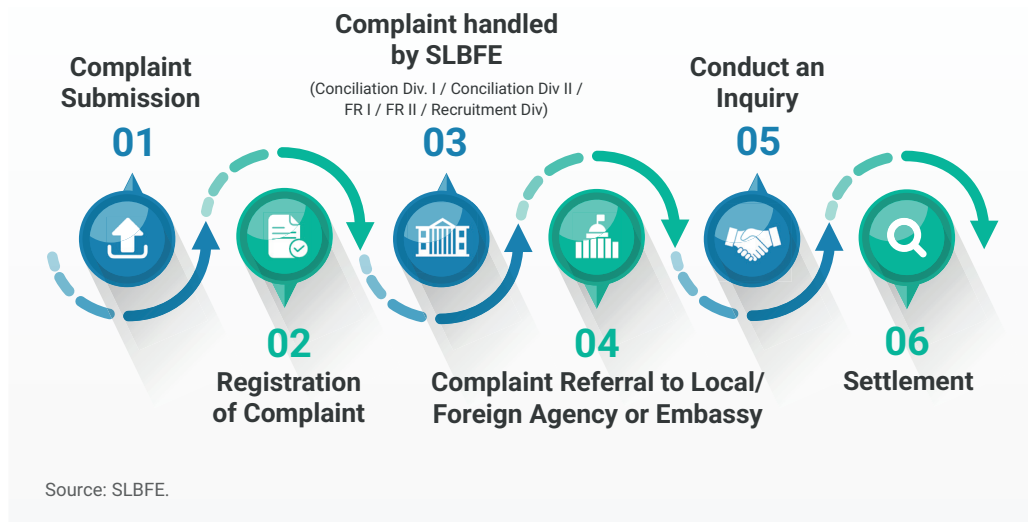
The complaint unit of the SLBFE contains two sections, including the Complaint Receiving Unit and the Complaint Settlement Unit (Conciliation Division). The Complaint Receiving Unit accepts a fully filled complaint form, including details of the migrant worker, passport number and a detailed description of the complaint. After initial screening, complaints deemed suitable for further review are assigned to an officer either at the Conciliation Division or the FR Division of the SLBFE. The assigned officer will discuss the issue with the complainant to identify the specific concern and understand the details of the complaint. Then the complaints are categorized by broad themes, including lack of food, inability to make phone calls, non-receipt of wages, harassment, sexual harassment, sickness, excessive workload, and family problems in Sri Lanka, to name a few. When handling complaints, they are categorized for their urgency based on their nature. For instance, complaints involving sexual harassment or hospitalization are considered very urgent, while others are categorized as normal.

The SLBFE also reaches out to other stakeholders for their cooperation in resolving the dispute, such as the local agent, sponsor and the Sri Lankan mission in the relevant country, to facilitate the inquiry and reconciliation efforts. Subsequently, an inquiry is scheduled by the SLBFE involving relevant stakeholders to investigate the complaint further. The SLBFE maintains a neutral stance throughout the process, ensuring impartiality in the resolution of the issue. Some forms of resolutions include repatriation of the migrant worker, placement of the worker with a new employer or advising the foreign employer to stop the SGBV.

This complaint handling mechanism operates on top of the pre-departure training provided to FDW by the SLBFE. This training, which is a 25-day residential training program, covers areas such as workplace communication, teamwork, and occupational health and safety measures, which are important to handle and address SGBV situations. These training components are in addition to training on performing tasks specific to FDWs, such as cleaning and sanitation practices, laundry and ironing techniques, and meal preparation and serving. The training provided to migrants for other occupations/ destinations includes pre-departure training for caregivers - a 45-day program providing a NVQ Level III Certification, training for domestic housekeeping jobs in Europe and East Asia (25 days), and training for jobs other than Domestic Housekeeping (2 days). The two-day orientation for non-domestic migrant workers covers legal and cultural awareness, language skills, personal health, financial literacy, and behavioural training (SLBFE, n.d.). As such, prior to departure, all FDWs are provided an awareness about the expected lifestyle, work environment, food, culture and rules and regulations about the country of destination. Additionally, the training

provided educates the FDWs about how to handle or complain about an issue, including a case of SGBV, while in the destination or through their NOK. Therefore, these training programmes aim to reduce the vulnerability of workers abroad and to give FDWs a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

Figure 2: Process of Conciliation at SLBFE



6. Thematic Analysis

This section examines the key theme of SGBV experienced by FDWs abroad, to understand how they encounter such violence in foreign contexts. The FDWs analysed in the qualitative data sample are all living in the household of the employer. This overlap between the place of work and place of accommodation places a greater risk of SGBV for FDWs, as there is less chance for such workers to separate their on and off duty times. Similarly, living-in FDWs are unlikely to meet people outside of the household regularly, which leaves the employer's family her only social network with regular physical association.

In such a setting, if the employer or any household member resorts to mistreating her, improving the situation or seeking outside assistance is extremely difficult. Additionally, when these issues are considered in the context of the previously discussed gendered nature of domestic work, recruitment and immigration context, and socio-cultural setting in the Middle East, further layers of vulnerability are added on FDWs.

The remainder of this discussion highlights how various harmful acts committed by diverse stakeholders result in different forms of harm or suffering by the FDW, all of which fall under the ambit of SGBV. The analysis is discussed under broad themes, reflecting the key issues faced by FDWs.

6.1 Compromising Safety and Privacy

The thematic findings show instances where privacy of the FDW was compromised due to acts by employer or individuals known to the employer, such as when a camera was fixed in the bathroom (Case 5), the sponsor watching through the keyhole while the FDW was bathing (Case 16), and male household members knocking on the FDW's bedroom door at night and forcing her to leave the bedroom door unlocked (Case 35). These acts severely compromised female migrant workers' privacy. As noted in several complaints, there is no proper place for these migrant women to sleep, keep her personal belongings or change clothes (Cases 26 and 30), with one case specifying that the FDW is forced to sleep under the staircase.

Another FDW (Case 14) has experienced tearing of her clothes while being beaten, which increased the FDW's vulnerability by compromising her dignity and personal safety. To escape abusive conditions, FDWs have resorted to fleeing from her workplace and seeking refuge in a camp, as was done by Case 6. This experience highlights the broader challenges that migrants encounter in their search for safe and secure spaces with privacy. Like the previous case, the FDW in Case 34 sought police assistance after escaping the employer's house, as she was seeking a safe environment, while the FDW in Case 38 fled the employer's residence due to attempted sexual harassment and sought refuge at a friend's house, demonstrating the extreme measures these women take to protect themselves. Highlighting another dimension of safety, one complaint highlights that the sponsor harasses the FDW when his wife is not at home (Case 7). This shows that the presence of the wife of the sponsor ensures the safety of this FDW. Nonetheless, in some instances, as discussed throughout this report, it had been an adult female household member who acted in a manner to undermine the safety of the FDW.

Furthermore, as noted in Case 27, after the initial harassment, a FDW was relocated to a new household by the foreign agent. However, as highlighted in the complaint, this new location was “a residence where prostitutes live”. This has put the FDW at even greater risk of exploitation and violence, further compromising her physical and emotional well-being.

The analysis of these findings show that safety directly impacts a female migrant worker’s ability to perform her job, as an unsafe environment leads to negatively affect their productivity and initiate a vicious cycle of workplace related harassment and abuse, that could also lead to giving up their jobs when abusive conditions become unbearable, causing

The overlap between the workplace and residence in gendered industries like domestic work and caregiving increases the risk of SGBV due to power imbalance, limited mobility, and lack of privacy.

instability and loss of livelihood. The experiences of the FDWs as detailed in the various incidents in the previous section reveal the severe impact that unsafe working conditions have on migrant workers’ mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Most of the female migrant workers’ experiences highlight significant safety, privacy and security concerns in the working and living environments, especially in the private spaces.

The overlap between the workplace and residence in gendered industries like domestic work and caregiving increases the risk of SGBV due to power imbalance, limited mobility, and lack of privacy. Living in the employer’s household blurs the line between professional and personal boundaries. It often leads to exploitative working conditions where employees are on-call with little control over their

time and space. Dependence on the employer for wages, food, and shelter limits the ability to report abuse or leave a bad situation, while limited movement and social isolation prevent access to legal protection and support systems. Lack of private space increases vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse and weak legal frameworks leave these workers with nowhere to go. In many cases, fear of retaliation, job loss or deportation forces victims to endure abuse in silence, and endure long-term mental and physical trauma.

Unsafe living and working conditions for FDWs are often accepted as normal, and they are made worse off by exposure to harmful or illegal activities, which further threatens their safety. Therefore, safety is essential for a worker’s ability to perform her job successfully. An unsafe working environment negatively impacts productivity, creating a vicious cycle of workplace-related harassment and abuse.

In many cases, fear of retaliation, job loss or deportation forces victims to endure abuse in silence, and endure long-term mental and physical trauma.

In the absence of proper protection, female migrant domestic workers’ well-being and dignity are at risk, causing them emotional and mental harm. Therefore, ensuring that they have access to accommodation, where they can feel secure, respected, and have their privacy upheld, is a fundamental human right that remains unmet in many situations.

Table 3: Summary of Issues on Compromising Safety and Privacy

Findings	Analysis
• Privacy violation through covert surveillance • Unsafe living conditions and absence of private space • Physical abuse during work • FDWs escape to camps, police, or friends' houses to avoid abuse • Relocation to high-risk environments by agents • Safety depends on the type of household members present	• Violations of safety, privacy, and dignity, in private spaces where work and living spaces overlap. • Living inside the employer's home blurs professional and personal boundaries. • Unsafe placements by agencies show gaps in monitoring, accountability, and post-abuse support. • The overlap between workplace and residence related power imbalance, limited mobility, and lack of privacy discourage reporting and help-seeking. • Lack of private space increases vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse. • Weak legal frameworks leave these workers with nowhere to go. • Fear of retaliation, and lack of legal access force FDWs to silently endure abuse.

Source: Authors.

6.2 Violation of Basic Human Needs

Qualitative data shows that migrant workers, often living in precarious conditions and separated from their families, are frequently denied access to proper, nutritious meals that go beyond physical hunger, which are essential for their physical and mental well-being. Various nuances of food deprivation include workers being denied access to food altogether and being given inadequate or poor-quality food that does not meet their caloric or nutritional needs. For instance, FDWs in Cases 21 and 41 were only given one meal per day. For the former, it consisted solely of bread, which highlights a case of severe deprivation of food experienced by a FDW at a workplace. In contrast, several complaints highlighted how FDWs were not given proper food (Cases 1, 4, 7, 41, 17, 18, 19, 25, 34, 35, 36). The FDW in Cases 20 and 38 complained that they were expected to eat leftover food, while FDW in Case 26 revealed that she was only given 'roti', and she was instructed to scavenge meat discarded in the garbage by the employer's family members' plate-waste. Leftover meals or trashed food, especially when they are possibly contaminated, pose a serious risk to the worker's health. Such treatment not only denies migrant workers the dignity of a proper meal but also exposes them to the health risks of consuming unsanitary food. The act of

being told to eat discarded scraps is an act of degradation, showing heightened disrespect for the worker's dignity. These experiences show a pattern of mistreatment and disrespect, where the well-being and dignity of migrant workers are compromised.

Aspects of food deprivation experienced by migrant FDWs, at times, go beyond their employers to stakeholders in foreign agencies. In some cases, where female migrant workers are handed over by their sponsors to foreign agents, the deprivation of basic needs, including food, continues to be a significant issue. As documented in Case 17, officers at the foreign agency confined the FDW to a room for three days without providing any food or drink. While the FDW in Case 31 was denied food and drink while being locked up in a hostel for three days by a foreign agent. This form of detention without basic sustenance highlights the vulnerability of female workers, especially when under the control of foreign agents.

However, when these findings on food-related issues experienced by migrant workers in this sample were triangulated with data from KIIs with conciliation officers of the SLBFE, it was evident that food-related issues are a common grievance among migrant workers. On the one hand, migrants experience a culture shock in terms of food when they arrive at their countries of destination, when the staple food items are different from those consumed in Sri Lanka or when the flavours or cooking methods result in food tasting different from what they are used to in Sri Lanka. As noted by one KII respondent, "in certain countries, rice is not a common meal, but migrant workers often expect it." Pre-emptively, the SLBFE has addressed this issue to some extent by "informing migrant workers about such differences in food before they depart" during pre-departure training. However, relatively minor culture shock-related issues become aggravated when employers' actions also combine with disrespectful behaviour and repeated neglect of migrant workers' grievances. During field work for previous studies, the research team has heard many accounts of employers allowing migrant workers to cook their meals separately to avoid this culture shock and facilitating a smooth transition to the country of destination. Another important concern raised by SLBFE officials during their KIIs was that some migrant workers fabricate complaints to justify their premature return to Sri Lanka, and complaints about food are common in this context. As such, officials highlighted the importance of distinguishing between genuine and fabricated complaints related to food issues. Qualitative data from the KIIs also confirmed accommodation-related issues faced by FDWs. For instance, an official highlighted that one FDW had to share a room with 6 other domestic workers who were all from the Philippines.

In certain countries, rice is not a common meal, but migrant workers often expect it.

Qualitative data indicated that there were instances where the sponsors avoided providing necessary medical treatments, and forced migrants to work while ill. One example is when the FDW in Case 1 had her hands injured from exposure to chlorine and was expected to continue to work without receiving medical attention. As evident in Case 18, the FDW's complaints about chest pain and requests for treatment were ignored by her employer. Similarly, Case 26 shows how the FDW suffered from severe symptoms, including wounds

on her hands and body, difficulty with movement, chest pain, and vomiting blood, and yet she had not received any medical treatment, while the FDW in Case 38 had to perform all the household chores despite being sick and not receiving any medical treatment. Case 22 reflects how the migrant worker had to spend her salary to purchase medicine for her burns,

The assurance of medical care created a false sense of security, trapping the worker into an exploitative environment where her health deteriorated further.

as the sponsor did not offer any medical treatment for the work-related burns. This highlights a troubling pattern where the worker is left to manage her injuries independently, without the support or care entitled from her employer.

The healthcare neglect of female migrant workers doesn't only happen at the sponsor's house, it also occurs with local and foreign agents, as shown in the following cases. Case 17 reflects where the worker suffered chest pain after being beaten by agents, which left her unable to work due to a lack of medical treatment. As noted in Case 13, the local agency has misled the worker about her pre-existing kidney disease, falsely assuring her that she would receive medical

care in Dubai. The promise of medical treatment in Dubai was never fulfilled. On the one hand, this highlights the agency's failure to take responsibility for her pre-existing health condition, while on the other, it reflects how the local agent used information about the FDW's health condition to mislead her into taking up employment overseas. As a result, the worker's health worsened in the absence of proper medical care. The assurance of medical care created a false sense of security, trapping the worker into an exploitative environment where her health deteriorated further. Moreover, the local agent has chosen to hide the worker's serious health condition and mislead the employer as well.

Triangulation of this evidence, with data from KIIs with the Conciliation Officer C, underscored that "most cases of sickness are faked, and local agencies don't usually step up to pay and return the migrant. It's like a mafia and requires proper regulations". Another dimension of health issues highlighted in KIIs was FDWs hiding their pre-existing

Employers might use food as a tool for retribution or threats that not only control meal breaks but also the proportion of the meal eaten, which has physical effects on the employees and hence increases their vulnerability to exploitation, for instance, sexual abuse.

health conditions and complaining of falling sick while overseas. While the local agent then arranges to source medicine in such a context, the migrant wants to return, making it more complex.

The foregone findings on the violation of basic human rights show that female migrant workers often face the violation of basic human needs, including food, healthcare, and accommodation. Many in this sample of FDWs were provided with inadequate or poor-quality living conditions, leaving them without proper rest, nutrition and access to medical care. The lack of a designated sleeping area means that the workers are deprived of the rest they need to recover from long hours of labour, further exploiting them. The failure to provide basic living conditions such as a decent place to sleep and adequate

time to rest not only exploits these workers but also reflects the employer's indifference to their health, dignity, and rights. Struggling to meet these fundamental needs, FDWs become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation. In the Middle East, food is deeply rooted in traditional conceptions of gender roles, which reflect the power hierarchies that disadvantage women, particularly migrant FDWs. There, the traditional gender roles manifest that women are responsible for preparing and serving food, but do not truly have access to it. This is the case for the domestic labour carried out mainly by migrant women, and it exacerbates the power structures leading to SGBV. Domestic workers who are predominantly female in many households are expected to eat separately, often eating leftovers or not getting enough to feed themselves. Employers might use food as a tool for retribution or threats that not only control meal breaks but also the proportion of the meal eaten, which has physical effects on the employees and hence increases their vulnerability to exploitation, for instance, sexual abuse. Food deprivation and general marginalization, which would expressly harm physiological integrity, not only accentuate psychological trauma but also compel the victims to be vulnerable to violence and cast doubt over the victim's capacity for intervention or escape from such abusive situations. Moreover, inadequate meals that lack the necessary nutrients to maintain health and energy affect their productivity, making them vulnerable to further mistreatment due to under-performing at their job. This issue is particularly dire when workers are subjected to long hours of labour, with little access to proper nutrition.

Migrant workers are often subjected to harsh living and working conditions and frequently experience difficulty in accessing medical care. As a result, their physical and mental well-being is significantly compromised, leading to increased vulnerability to illness, injury, and long-term health problems. Additionally, the overlap between place of work and place of residence mitigates the chances of FDW not showing up to work or calling in a sick day when unwell to work. Moreover, the gendered nature of FDW and associated continuous demand, along with cultural barriers to accessing health care without an employer's involvement, limit an FDWs' access to sick leave. Moreover, the FDWs have a limited understanding of their rights to take leave in order to access health care. As such, FDWs often do not speak up when they are sick due to fear of losing money, getting fired, or being sent back home. Unlike other occupations, FDWs do not have Human Resource (HR) teams to turn to if faced with such issues. This leads many to continue working even when ill, which in turn worsens their health and long-term wellbeing.

Unlike other occupations, FDWs do not have Human Resource (HR) teams to turn to if faced with such issues.

These mistreatments, in terms of basic human needs, show a clear disregard for the health and dignity of migrant workers, who are often treated as expendable labour. The failure to provide proper healthcare and the requirement to work while sick reveal a broader pattern of exploitation, where the worker's health is secondary to their labour. These situations demonstrate a clear violation of their basic rights. By withholding necessary medical treatment, sponsors and employers fail to fulfil their basic responsibility to ensure the worker's well-being, extending beyond just providing a safe working environment. The refusal to provide medicine, even after the worker requested it, indicates a lack of responsibility and empathy from the employer.

Table 4: Summary of Violation of Basic Human Needs

Key Theme	Findings	Analysis
Food Deprivation	• FDWs are given only one meal per day, often bread or “roti”. • Fed only leftovers or plate waste. • Instructed to scavenge discarded scraps. • Food deprivation as a punishment.	• Food is used as a tool of control and retribution in power hierarchies. • Poor nutrition affects health and increases vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (including SGBV). • Psychological trauma from food deprivation impacts the ability to resist or escape abuse. • Culture shock is a contributing factor for food related complaints.
Healthcare Neglect	• Ignored the medical needs of FDWs. • FDWs had to buy their own medicine. • Physically harmed FDWs without follow-up care. • Local and foreign agents misled or failed to treat pre-existing health issues.	• Healthcare access is limited due to the overlap of workplace and living space. • Lack of access to medical care worsens health outcomes and vulnerability. • Neglect of healthcare reflects a broader pattern of exploitation. • FDWs continue working despite illness due to the fear of job loss or deportation. • No HR support systems in domestic work to advocate for sick workers. • Cultural and gender barriers restrict access to healthcare without the employer’s permission. • Health complaints may be fabricated to seek repatriation, making assessment complex.
Accommodation and Rest	• Lack of proper rest spaces or time off. • Unsafe or degrading sleeping accommodation, no place to change or store belongings. • No proper rest space despite long working hours.	• Inadequate accommodation affects rest and recovery. • Poor living conditions reflect employer indifference to worker dignity. • Physical exhaustion combined with poor nutrition and illness increases the risk of exploitation.

Source: Authors.

6.3 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a sensitive issue that FDWs frequently experience but find difficult to report. The qualitative data analysed in this study reveal multiple dimensions of sexual harassment, including not only direct physical contact, but also inappropriate proposals, demands for sexual favours, and incidents of perpetrators exposing themselves.

Instances of direct physical contact identified as sexual harassment include the FDW in Case 11, who was caring for a patient at home, and was sexually harassed around 1.00 a.m. over three consecutive nights by the patient's 35-year-old son. Similarly, Case 20 demonstrates that the FDW's sponsor engaged in sexual harassment at home by kissing, groping, and threatening her. Many cases involve direct physical contact, such as touching and kissing (i.e. Cases 11 and 20). Examples of inappropriate proposals and demands for sexual favours were also evident. In Case 24, the house owner repeatedly harassed the FDW and attempted to exert pressure by offering money in exchange for compliance towards his advances. As reported by Case 35, after the FDW rejected her sponsor's repeated advances, he exposed himself, called at night and insisted that she open the door. When she refused, he banged on it angrily, further aggravating the situation. The FDW in Case 29 reported that her sponsor committed various forms of abuse, including talking about extramarital affairs, knocking on her bedroom door at night and forcing her to leave it unlocked, watching pornographic films and asking her to join, behaving indecently when his wife is not home, and taking off his clothes when the FDW was around. In Case 38, the sponsor's attempt to sexually harass the worker resulted in not only psychological trauma but also physical symptoms such as swelling in her neck and hand. Similarly, as noted in Complaint 33, the employer's 17-year-old son continued to harass the FDW by exposing himself. While some of these cases included actual acts, others reflected attempted harassment. For instance, in Case 24, the sponsor's father, who visited the house during his free time, attempted to sexually harass the FDW. When the worker reported the incident, the wife of the sponsor responded by handing over the FDW to the agency without addressing the issue.

The sexual harassment experienced by FDWs often occurs in private settings, making it difficult for the victims to seek immediate help. Several reports describe inappropriate proposals and demand for sexual favours (Cases 35, 29). These advances are often accompanied by threats or coercion. Regardless of being attempted or committed, or indirect, such as exposing themselves or a direct assault, the threat of sexual harassment places a FDW in a vulnerable situation. Moreover, FDWs have faced repeated inappropriate and unethical behaviour from the men living in or visiting the house. This familial connection complicates the situation, as it may limit the victim's ability to report the abuse without fear of retaliation. Moreover, when victims do report harassment to other family members or agencies, they often receive little to no support. For example, in Case 23, the housewife ignored the complaint and handed the victim over to an agency without addressing the issue. In some cases, rejecting advances leads to further harassment and intimidation (Case 35). This includes threats, banging on doors at night, and other forms of psychological pressure. The constant threat of harassment creates a pervasive atmosphere of fear. Victims are often forced to comply with unreasonable demands out of fear for their safety.

(Case 29). Qualitative data also highlights that the FDWs face sexual harassment within the foreign agencies responsible for their employability. As reported in Case 17, when the FDW was handed over to the foreign agency after an incident of abuse by the employer, while at the agency, she was sexually assaulted further. Details of the encounter specify that the foreign agent and officers at the foreign agency assaulted her severely, including removing her clothing and subjecting her to physical assault, striking her on her chest/breasts and attempting to harass her sexually and forcing her to have sex with people from that foreign agency. The officials at the agency have also coerced her to sit on their laps. Similarly, another case revealed that when a FDW was unwell and had been entrusted to the Agency by the Sponsor for repatriation to Sri Lanka, an individual at the foreign agency had been attempting to harass her sexually (Case 37). Similarly, in Case 39, despite initial efforts by the foreign agency to relocate the employee after repeated harassment by her employer, the sponsor leveraged their authority to reclaim her, citing the end of her probation period, assuring that no sexual harassment had occurred. Consequently, the worker was trapped within the same environment where harassment persisted, showing that the current protective mechanisms are inadequate and sponsors can override agency interventions. These examples highlight how helpless FDWs become, when the foreign agents who are supposed to safeguard and protect migrant workers resort to contributing to further sexual harassment. These acts of sexual harassment by foreign agents and their inability to safeguard migrant workers underscore the systemic failure of foreign agencies to protect the rights and dignity of FDWs.

Many of the cases reported to the SLBFE under sexual harassment complaints are described in vague terms.

Many of the cases reported to the SLBFE under sexual harassment complaints are described in vague terms. This lack of detailed information is common and can be attributed to several reasons, such as cultural and social stigmas surrounding sexual harassment that makes victims reluctant to disclose explicit details.

When findings related to sexual harassment, based on complaints lodged by FDWs, were triangulated with KIIs with SLBFE officials, it was evident that the SLBFE has clearly defined steps to handle a complaint of sexual harassment. As confirmed by Conciliation Officer C, SLBFE handles cases of attempted harassment and committed harassment with two distinct sets of steps. When the sexual harassment complaint is of an attempted harassment but has not escalated to an actual direct/ physical act, the SLBFE usually instructs the foreign agency to either find a new workplace or arrange for her to return to Sri Lanka if she requests it. Typically, most of the sexual harassment cases are difficult to prove. Insights gathered from KIIs with Conciliation Officers stated that, “sexual harassment is also hard to prove, unlike the general category of harassment, because sexual harassment cases require the victim to undertake a medical test immediately and, for which the victim needs to contact the embassy as soon as possible”. As reported by SLBFE officials, “some migrants report being sexually harassed only after they return to Sri Lanka. In such instances, the SLBFE is rather helpless, as the sexual harassment cannot be proven”. At the same time, KIIs with SLBFE officials underscored that “some people falsely allege they were sexually abused to facilitate a prioritized and immediate return to Sri Lanka” (Conciliation Manager B).

In the case of an actual direct physical assault, the steps taken include the worker being “first taken to the police station, then to the hospital, and a court case being filed with the medical report. If the harassment is confirmed, the worker is compensated and usually returns to Sri Lanka”. However, to facilitate this process, the report/complaint must be filed on the day of the incident to facilitate medical tests. An example of this was seen in Case 11, where a complaint regarding a sexual harassment case was filed with the police, following the submission of her complaint, she was referred to a medical examination, and the resulting reports have been handed over to the police. When the sexual assault was confirmed by those reports, the employer was ordered to pay a compensation of SAR 50,000 to the FDW, and she was expected to be repatriated to Sri Lanka.

Some people falsely allege they were sexually abused to facilitate a prioritized and immediate return to Sri Lanka.

Reflecting yet another dimension of sexual harassment, one KII respondent elaborated that “in some cases, FDWs become pregnant within a month before leaving Sri Lanka and are aware that the pregnancy took place in Sri Lanka. Despite knowing this, they proceed with their job abroad, and to secure recruitment incentives provided, they later claim that the pregnancy was the result of sexual assault by the sponsor or house owner” (Conciliation Officer B). For instance, as mentioned by Conciliation Officers D and C, an FDW was discovered to be pregnant upon arriving abroad for employment. Since the FDW’s husband was disabled and could not father a child, her family was enraged and believed it was a result of sexual assault while employed overseas and complained to the SLBFE. However, investigations revealed that the child was fathered by another person while in Sri Lanka”. This shows the complicated nature of sexual harassment and the difficulty of proving the same.

The above findings converge towards the conclusion that sexual harassment is a pervasive and distressing issue faced by many FDWs while employed overseas. These women, already vulnerable due to their socio-economic status, isolation from their families, and dependence on their employers, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. The delicate nature and nuances of harassment make it challenging for many FDWs to seek help. In many cases, the harassment occurs in private settings, making it difficult for the victims to seek immediate assistance. Furthermore, much of the sexual harassment reported by FDWs is perpetrated by members of the employer’s family.

FDWs are vulnerable to sexual harassment not only in the workplace but also in local and foreign recruitment agencies.

This familial connection of the perpetrator constrains the victim’s ability to report the abuse to the employer without fear of retaliation. FDWs are vulnerable to sexual harassment not only in the workplace but also in local and foreign recruitment agencies. Such experiences constitute a serious violation of their human rights and a significant barrier to achieving

safe, equitable, and productive work environments due to power imbalances, cultural barriers, and limited legal protections in host countries. Ultimately, sexual harassment not only violates FDW's basic human rights but also compounds the challenges they face in encompassing unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile or intimidating work environment.

Table 5: Summary of Sexual Harassment

Findings	Analysis	Triangulate with KII Findings
• Various Harassment in the forms of touching, groping, kissing, exposure, verbal advances, coercion, showing pornography, indecent behaviour, and knocking on doors. • Complaints are ignored and FDWs are sent back to agencies. • Advances often involve threats and coercion. • Attempted and committed harassment. • Perpetrators include male sponsors, sons, fathers, male relatives, and agency officials.	• Harassment in private, limiting access to help. • Familial connection of perpetrators and employer deters FDW from reporting. • Abuse also happens in both local and foreign agencies. • Sexual Harassment results in human right violations which hinder safe and fair work environments. • Issues are worsened by power imbalances, cultural stigma, and weak legal protection.	• Shame and cultural pressure discourage FDWs from reporting. Hence, many complaints to SLBFE are unclear or incomplete. • SLBFE distinguishes between attempted and committed cases. • Proving abuse is difficult and requires immediate medical tests. • Some FDWs only report after returning home, limiting SLBFE's ability to take action. • A few make false claims to speed up return or gain benefits. • Pre-migration pregnancies are sometimes wrongly reported as abuse abroad, complicating case verification.

Source: Authors.

6.4 Physical and Mental Harassment

A common form of physical harassment experienced by many FDWs is beating (Cases of 3, 4, 14, 15, 26, 28, and 41). The reported assaults range from beatings with hands, feet, and objects (Cases 3, 4, 14, and 28) to incidents where the FDW's clothes were torn during the assault. In Case 39, the house owner's wife physically assaulted the FDW on several

occasions. In Case 16, the sponsor had instructed his son to record the beating on video when the FDW's clothes were torn. In Case 38, the FDW was punished if the children cry, despite the children being young and crying being normal. In Case 40, the worker has been subjected to physical assault and confinement in a room where she was beaten.

Another common physical harassment experienced by FDWs is the deliberate infliction of burns by employers, illustrating a pattern of intentional abuse. In one case (Case 22), a worker endured severe burns to her hands when hot water was intentionally poured on them by her sponsor, while another FDW's body (Case 28) was burned with a cigarette. Other types of physical harassment include being abused with household chemicals. For instance, the FDW in Case 2 was forced to drink a washing chemical, while the migrant worker in Case 26 had experienced the employer applying a household cleaning chemical "Harpic," on her wounds to intensify her suffering. These acts go beyond simple punishment; they demonstrate a calculated attempt to cause lasting physical harm and instil deep fear. Moreover, FDWs in Cases 4 and 17 were strangled by the employer and the former was also pushed down a set of stairs by the employer. Similarly, the FDW in Case 40 sustained a leg injury after being pushed. In addition to employers, there were instances where other domestic workers harassed FDWs. As noted in Case 40, the FDW was physically harassed by another domestic worker. At times, FDWs were beaten when they couldn't perform a task assigned by the employer. For instance, as noted in Case 41, the FDW experienced significant harassment when she could not lift a carpet as instructed by the sponsor. As evident, the task assigned was beyond the capacity of the worker. Subsequently, the sponsor and the sponsor's daughter attempted to assault the FDW. When the FDW complained about this to the foreign agency, upon returning home from the foreign agency, the sponsor lady further assaulted the FDW.

A common reason for physical and mental harassment is allegations of mistreatment to children or stealing. For instance, the FDW in Case 42 was accused of hitting an 8-month-old baby after the employer found the child's skin turned red. As per the FDW this was due to a fall, despite her efforts to catch the baby. She was also accused of stealing clothes and two rings of the sponsors. This FDW faced severe mistreatment, including being denied food, physical assault, confiscation of her SIM card, withdrawal of her previously paid salary, and blackmail with threats of police involvement. At times, FDWs are threatened with physical harassment. One FDW described how her employer threatened to cut her mouth with a knife (Case 26). Similarly, FDWs in Cases 15 and 26 have also been threatened with knives (more details of verbal threats are discussed in the next section).

When faced with such physical harassment, some FDWs have reacted in many ways. Some run away, while others may seek police protection, while some request the employer to hand them over to the foreign agency. After enduring ongoing abuse, the FDW, in Case 34, ran away from the house and sought help from the police. When she returned to the workplace with the police, the employer promised to end the harassment. However, just ten days later, her employer started abusing her again and locked her in a room for four days. The FDW in case 17 revealed that, after enduring multiple instances of workplace harassment, she was handed over to the agency by the house owners. While at the agency, she was further harassed by the agency staff, where she was severely beaten on the chest and

breasts after stripping her of her clothing and also assaulted with a cable. Subsequently, instead of providing support, upon beating the agency staff forced her to return to the same workplace. This shows that FDWs have a very limited scope of support when placed with an abusive employer. Agencies responsible for their welfare sometimes fail in their duties, subjecting these workers to further difficulties and mistreatment instead of offering protection and support, while the police protection is limited to warning employers with

no follow up action to ensure the safety and protection of workers.

If the sponsor is found to have harassed the migrant, the sponsor will face legal repercussions and the SLBFE will blacklist such sponsors as well.

KII with Conciliation Manager A confirmed that harassment includes physical abuse, choking, and verbal abuse. Such acts are most often perpetrated by the sponsor and occasionally by the foreign agents. KIIs with conciliation officers confirmed that harassment could occur either at the place of employment, within the foreign agency or at both places. The KIIs also revealed that in some cases, the migrant flees the sponsor's home if they are subjected to severe harassment, and in these cases the migrant can be jailed if the sponsor complains. On the other hand, if the sponsor is found to have

harassed the migrant, the sponsor will face legal repercussions and the SLBFE will blacklist such sponsors as well. If the local agent does not take sufficient action as required to facilitate the migrant, particularly during a complaint, the agent's license can be suspended.

KIIs with local agents revealed that while harassment cases are reported, most of these complaints are challenging to substantiate. Each country has its own labour regulations, and sponsors are expected to adhere to these rules when hiring workers. In some instances, workers may provide inaccurate or incomplete accounts of their situations. However, as per this local agent, approximately 10% of the reported cases are found to be genuine instances of harassment, where sponsors engage in physical abuse of the FDWs.

As noted by the FDWs, the reasons for harassment were due to a fault of the employer. In Case 30, the reason for harassment had been a misunderstanding due to "the sponsor's family accusing the employee of mistreating the children, and in response, the sponsor's wife allegedly beat her". In Case 9, the physical assault began when the FDW expressed her intention to leave. However, conciliation officers highlighted that deceptive practices during the recruitment process or the absence of appropriate work attitudes among FDWs can increase their vulnerability to abuse. For instance, one Conciliation Officer noted that when migrants have pre-existing illnesses or disabilities that affect their ability to perform domestic work, concealing such conditions during recruitment can lead to negative consequences. Once employers discover these issues, they may feel misled, cheated and enraged, especially in the context of the upfront incentive-related costs borne, increasing the FDW's vulnerability to harassment. The Conciliation Officer further noted that some FDWs, in collaboration with the local recruitment agents, manipulate pre-departure medical tests through various means to disguise health conditions to facilitate employment, and such acts set the stage for harassment due to under-performance or misleading the employer, when in the country of destination.

FDWs often experience not just physical abuse, but also severe verbal, mental and emotional harassment. Mental harassment can include verbal abuse, humiliation, and being forced to act against one's will, all of which can cause lasting psychological harm. For instance, FDWs in Cases 21, 22, 26 and 33 reported constant scolding and reprimanding by the sponsor or the wife of the sponsor. Such treatment undermines the FDW's confidence in performing their duties and erodes their self-worth. As noted in Case 40, the sponsor's wife publicly threatened and humiliated the employee, calling her "crazy" in front of others, an act that constitutes verbal abuse and public degradation, which controls the worker, damaging her dignity and self-esteem.

FDWs often experience not just physical abuse, but also severe verbal, mental and emotional harassment.

Another common form of mental harassment is the use of verbal threats. Several workers have experienced threats that further escalate their mental distress. As noted in Case 29, the employee had recorded a video as proof of the harassment inflicted upon her; however, the sponsor had confiscated her phone and threatened her to not disclose the situation to anyone. Similarly, in Case 31, the FDW was threatened that if she filed any complaints with the SLBFE while in Saudi Arabia, regarding the mistreatment she had suffered, she would be kept imprisoned and not allowed to leave the country. This caused the FDW to fear for her life in Saudi Arabia. Such threats contribute to the workers' ongoing psychological trauma, as they are trapped between enduring abuse and facing severe consequences for seeking assistance. These threats often prevent them from seeking help or escaping the situation.

Another, rare but equally harmful form of verbal abuse involves undermining and belittling both the cultural and religious values of the worker. As illustrated in Case 4, such abuse negatively affects the psychological well-being of migrant workers. Another form of mental harassment experienced by FDWs is social alienation in their workplaces, which worsens feelings of loneliness and distress. Moreover, in Case 36, the FDW was deliberately ignored by household members, who avoided speaking to or acknowledging her presence. This isolation led to feelings of invisibility and disconnection, which further contributed to the deterioration of her mental health. When harassed in such ways, in extreme cases, some workers have reached a point of desperation, where they pleaded for help from their family or become suicidal. As observed in Case 14, the distressed FDW had tearfully pleaded for assistance from the NOK, saying, "please save me". Such instances make NOK helpless, as immediate action is not practical, and they fear for the life of their loved one. Similarly, in Case 24, the FDW stated that she could no longer bear the harassment and wanted to return to Sri Lanka immediately, otherwise, she would be forced to commit suicide to escape the harassment. This reflects the extreme psychological strain these workers face in their daily lives. The expression of suicidal thoughts and self-harm among female migrant workers shows the serious mental health impact of constant threats and dangers. As evident from Cases 24 and 26, being exposed to ongoing harassment, violence, and a lack of support puts migrant female workers at high risk. These extreme actions are a sign of how deeply unsafe environments affect their well-being. These incidents not only

put female migrant workers' physical safety at risk but also damages their emotional well-being, making it hard for them to feel safe or appreciated in their jobs. As noted in Case 41, the verbal abuse is not limited to sponsors. When the FDW was taken to the agency,

In the Middle East countries, the domestic sector has limited labour protection, lacks oversight and is not well enforced.

the staff, instead of addressing the issue or providing a resolution, also scolded her, demonstrating a broader pattern of neglect and mistreatment within the recruitment and employment system.

Female migrant workers often face various forms of severe physical and mental harassment in their workplaces, where their vulnerability is heightened by their status as migrants, women, and living-in workers. Many face physical and mental harm in private homes, where they have limited access to outside support and have limitations in reporting such abuse

due to fear of punishment, job loss, or being sent back to their countries. In the Middle East countries, the domestic sector has limited labour protection, lacks oversight and is not well enforced. These allow abusers to act without fear of consequences. Additionally, the Kafala System gives employers total power over migrant workers, while the socio-cultural setting, cultural differences, language barriers, social stigma and victim blaming further limit women's freedom to seek help. Therefore, the intersection of gender and migrant status deepens their vulnerability to exploitation, making it harder for them to seek justice or protection. As a result, many FDWs get stuck in a vicious cycle of exploitation and abuse.

Table 6: Summary of Physical and Mental Harassment

Findings	Analysis	Triangulated with KII Findings
• Harassment in the form of physical abuse, beating, ripping clothes, burning, inflicting chemical harm, strangulating, pushing down stairs, threatening with knives and being injured from falls. • Forms of verbal abuse include scolding, humiliating, confiscating phone, threatening	• Happens in private homes with little supervision or chance to escape. • Mental harassment causes trauma, loss of dignity, and poor mental health.	• SLBFE can blacklist sponsors or suspend agency licenses for abuse or neglect. • Some FDWs flee abuse but risk detention if sponsors complain.

• These experiences cause severe mental stress and suicidal thoughts. • Abuse is also committed by agency staff.	• FDWs are especially vulnerable due to their gender, migrant status, and live-in work setup. • Fear of retaliation, job loss, or detention discourages reporting. • Weak labour laws, the Kafala System, and agency failures allow abuse to continue. • Cultural and language barriers deepen their isolation and emotional suffering.	• Many complaints are vague or lack evidence. • Pre-departure medical test manipulation or poor work attitudes may lead to employer frustration and abuse. • Legal action against sponsors is rare due to a lack of proof. • Most complaints are fabricated.
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Source: Authors.

6.5 Inadequate Rest and Excessive Workload

Many FDWs are subjected to gruelling work schedules that leave them physically and mentally exhausted. Qualitative data showed that the FDW in Case 1 was forced to work from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. the following morning, allowing only four hours of rest/sleep. Cases 14 and 4 report that the FDWs are forced to work continuously from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. the following day. Expecting FDWs to work long hours repeatedly not only affects their capacity to work productively and efficiently, but also makes them susceptible to further abuse in the form of punishments due to poor performance. As reported in Case 38 the FDW was solely responsible for caring for the five children in addition to performing all the household chores. This excessive workload forced her to work continuously, often until after 2 a.m.

The main reason for the lack of adequate rest among FDWs is the excessive workload expected from them. For instance, in Cases 1, 22, and 30, FDWs were responsible for simultaneously caring for three children, including a 4-year-old child and a 3-year-old child, in the first two cases, respectively, while also managing all household chores such as cleaning, laundry, and cooking. In Case 24, it was specifically noted that initially, the FDW was sent by a local agency as a housemaid, however, she was also expected to care for the employers' children. This expectation of constant multi-tasking creates significant physical and psychological strain, particularly when workers are denied adequate rest. These unreasonable demands reduce their ability to perform tasks effectively and also compromise their health and well-being, as observed in several reported cases of overwork and neglect.

Another aspect of being overworked is when FDWs are expected to work in multiple households. For instance, in Case 2, the FDW had to work at multiple locations, including her employer's household as well as in the homes of extended family members or other unrelated households. The FDW in Case 16 was required to manage tasks in the sponsor's mother's home as well as in the sponsor's home. In some rare cases, i.e. Case 4, the sponsor gets money from others by sending the FDW to various households as a domestic worker. The practice of sponsors sending FDWs to multiple households for work in exchange for monetary gain is a clear form of severe labour exploitation. By profiting from the workers' services across different households, sponsors exploit their labour and disregard their well-being. The pervasive issue of overwork is not limited to the workplace but also within the network of recruiters and facilitators involved in international migration. As noted in Case 31, the FDW was forced to perform various types of work at the hostel in the foreign agency.

The KI with the Official C underscored how FDWs are overworked by their employers. Similarly, the KI with Conciliation Officer E reveal that local recruitment agents exploit the relatively low level of education of these migrants by simply encouraging them to migrate, promising high salaries, without giving them a clear understanding of how tough the work conditions can be. KI with Conciliation Officer C revealed an interesting observation regarding complaints about excessive workloads and difficult tasks. According to the officer, such complaints are relatively rare among migrants from rural areas like Polonnaruwa or Monaragala which is mainly attributed to their familiarity with tough working conditions back home, which enables them to manage the workload more effectively in host countries.

Domestic work involves various responsibilities and associated occupations such as child care, elder care, cook, and cleaner to name a few. In a family setting, unpaid care work is

FDW's, the live-in nature of their employment further blurs the boundaries of work-life balance, where many are expected to remain on-call day and night.

traditionally performed by a single adult female member of the family. However, in a paid domestic work setting, these ideally should be clearly defined domestic work roles agreed upon by specific workers. However, FDWs often endure inadequate rest and excessive workloads, as employers often take advantage of the women's capacity to handle multiple roles and impose expectations far beyond agreed terms, despite being hired for a specific job. Additionally, some FDWs are expected to work across multiple locations or households beyond their contracted assignments. These acts by employers reflect that FDWs are effectively treated as a commodity, moving from one job site to another without consideration for comfort, safety, or well-being.

Such unreasonable expectations and continuous role expansion impose a heavy burden on these workers by overwhelming them with excessive responsibilities, which not only pushes them to their physical and emotional limits but also reflects a disregard for their overall well-being. For FDW's, the live-in nature of their employment further blurs the boundaries of work-life balance, where many are expected to remain on-call day and night.

The consistent lack of proper rest faced by female migrant workers is a significant issue that underscores their vulnerability to exploitative and abusive working conditions.

Moreover, forcing FDWs to work unreasonable hours violates their rights as workers. Employment contracts approved by the SLBFE ensure that workers are entitled to reasonable working hours and breaks, apart from weekly rest time and annual breaks. Depriving workers of reasonable rest periods underscores their vulnerability to exploitative practices that prioritize economic gain over the fundamental human right to adequate rest. The lack of rest reveals a broader disregard for the human rights of female migrant workers, particularly the right to decent working conditions. Additionally, the absence of fair compensation or an overtime payment for this extra labour adds a financial dimension to the harassment, as workers are exploited for unpaid tasks under coercive conditions. The foregoing findings also showed that in addition to the employer, the foreign agents are also overworking FDWs. This not only amplifies the vulnerability of migrant workers but also underscores the systemic exploitation present at multiple nodes of the migration process.

Table 7: Summary of Inadequate Rest and Excessive Workload

Findings	Analysis	Triangulate with KII findings
• FDWs work long hours (e.g., 10 a.m. to 6 a.m.) with minimal sleep/rest. • Continuous work without adequate rest affects physical health and job performance. • FDWs perform multiple roles including childcare, cooking and cleaning. • Some work for multiple households, including extended family or unrelated employers. • Some are forced to work in foreign agency hostels.	• Live-in work blurs boundaries, keeping FDWs on-call day and night. • Lack of rest breaks SLBFE contracts that ensure reasonable hours and rest. • Denying rest violates basic human rights and decent work standards. • Denying rest violates basic human rights and decent work standards. • Lack of overtime pay reinforces financial exploitation. • Expanding roles violate job terms and human dignity.	• Conciliation Officers confirmed that excessive workload is common. • Local agents exploit low-educated FDWs, promising high salaries without explaining tough conditions. • Rural FDWs often report fewer overworked complaints, possibly due to greater tolerance or experience. • Exploitation also occurs within foreign agencies.

Source: Authors.

6.6 Deception and Forced Labour

Qualitative data showed how several cases reveal how women are misled about their job locations or the nature of their work, only to find themselves trapped in abusive conditions. As noted in Case 1, initially the FDW was supposed to go to Kuwait for employment, but instead, she was sent to Saudi Arabia, using someone else's visa. Similarly, another complaint (Case 31) reveals that the local agency trained her at the SLBFE to be a cleaner and sent her to Saudi Arabia, where the foreign agency forcibly employed her as a domestic worker. Such deception creates immense psychological stress for workers when their expectations do not match the reality of their employment.

In some instances, as reported by FDWs, the deception by recruitment agents leads to situations of forced labour, where migrant workers are held against their will often with financial manipulation. For instance, when the FDW in Case 31 refused the domestic worker job since it was not the job she came for and tried to return to Sri Lanka, she was forced by the recruitment agent to work as a domestic worker saying that she would have to pay 2.2 million Sri Lankan Rupees to return. In another instance, the FDW in Case 4 revealed that she was blackmailed by the sponsor, who threatened to deduct 200 Riyals from her salary. As such, financial manipulation, through fabricated debt or false financial demands, often accompanied by forced labour conditions, plays a significant role in trapping FDWs in abusive working environments.

These findings show that FDWs are disproportionately affected by deception and forced labour due to gendered expectations. As mentioned earlier, employers anticipate that FDWs can efficiently handle multiple tasks, can be repurposed to other occupations even across different work locations. Often FDWs are deceived or coerced into their jobs under false pretenses. Deception regularly starts with the recruitment process, where FDWs are often misled about where the jobs are and the responsibilities involved. Such a lack of transparency during the recruitment process undermines trust in both local and foreign recruitment agencies, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation.

When coupled with the upfront incentive of USD 1000-2000 received by FDWs before taking up employment, even if they disagree with the role and responsibility of work upon arriving in the destination country, their inability to return this upfront incentive traps them into a forced labour situation. The combination of financial incentives and gendered vulnerabilities creates a cycle of exploitation where deception results in forced labour, undermining trust in recruitment agencies and increasing the risks for migrant women. Moreover, when fraudulent documents are produced for migration, it adds a layer of risk and vulnerability due to the risk of legal repercussions in their host countries.

Table 8: Summary of Deception and Forced Labor

Findings	Analysis
• FDWs misled about job location and role. • Deception leads to psychological stress and forced labour. • Financial manipulation is used as coercion.	• Deceptive recruitment practices exploit FDWs' gendered vulnerabilities. • Mismatch between job promises and reality creates conditions of forced labour. • Upfront incentives (USD 1000–2000) create financial dependency, making refusal or return difficult. • Use of fraudulent documentation increases legal risk and deepens exploitation.

Source: Authors.

6.7 Non-payment of Wages

Qualitative data reveals several examples of persistent issues in delayed wage payments experienced by FDWs. For instance, FDWs in Cases 15, 21, and 22, had received SAR 1,000 each, which was less than their agreed salary of SAR 1,125 per month. Moreover, in addition to partial payment of wages, the employer expects the FDW to purchase necessary household supplies such as soap for personal use, normally provided by the employer, at her expense. As highlighted in Cases 2, 16, 21, and 30, FDWs are often expected to juggle multiple roles, working across different locations and taking on a wide range of additional responsibilities, from domestic chores to childcare. Despite the heavy workload and diverse tasks outside their agreement, these workers are not receiving at least their agreed payment. When the FDW in Case 8 had unpaid wages and inquired about the remaining salary, she was informed that the payment would be made upon her return to Sri Lanka. Similarly, in Case 16 the sponsor's sister had failed to pay the FDW's salary for two consecutive months, while Case 30 reports non-payment of wages for one month. Moreover, as mentioned in Case 38, the FDW was promised a salary of LKR 120,000, but she only received LKR 110,000 since her first salary. Similarly, as reported in Cases 39 and 40, the employees were not paid regularly. Moreover, when the FDW in Case 40 informed her sponsor about a proposed workplace change, her one month's salary was withheld, and she faced severe harassment. Similarly, the employer of the FDW in Case 42 had withdrawn the previously paid salary, when the employer suspected that the migrant worker had mistreated a child and stolen jewellery.

With regards to Case 2, the worker's employer yelled at her and initially refused to pay her, only relenting after she started crying. This behaviour highlights the power imbalance between the employer and the migrant worker, which is often exacerbated by the worker's fear of retaliation due to losing their job or facing harassment.

KIIs with officials at the SLBFE revealed another explanation to the issue of payment of partial wages. While they acknowledge that most wage delays or non-payment related grievances are valid, they also highlighted that this could be due to foreign exchange rate variations. Specifically, Conciliation Officer B stressed that often wages and the amount FDW can remit back home are explained by recruitment agents in LKR terms, while the employment contract specifies wages in SAR. As such, the KII by Conciliation Officer E's respondents noted that "this can sometimes mean that the amount remitted back in LKR is lower than what was promised to them initially in LKR". As such, some complaints are due to the left behind families misunderstanding the exchange rate applied in converting

For FDWs, the overlap between the workplace and the place of living is blurred, creating a unique vulnerability when wages are delayed or unpaid.

SAR to LKR, while no underpayment has taken place. The SLBFE officials further stressed that migrants are given an understanding about these issues at the time of pre-departure training. However, it was highlighted that a better information session/ training needs to be provided to avoid this type of misunderstanding to minimize these issues

For FDWs, the overlap between the workplace and the place of living is blurred, creating a unique vulnerability when wages are delayed or unpaid. Unlike in other professions where workers are free to refuse to work until they get their due payments, FDWs are often compelled to keep working even when they are exploited financially, as they live inside the employer's household. This arrangement leaves them almost entirely dependent on their employer for food, accommodation, and other basic needs, making it impossible for them to withhold their labour. FDWs continue to work even when paid less than what was agreed upon or subjected to wage theft, as many are afraid that if they resist, they will suffer verbal abuse, threats, or not get paid at all. Employers also often take advantage of their dependency to compel FDWs to work at two locations with additional roles, without any adjustments to the pay. This lack of separation between the working place and living place compounds their vulnerability, compelling them to endure mistreatment and financial insecurity while remaining trapped in exploitative conditions.

As mentioned above, another dimension of wage theft is the high cost of migration, associated with recruitment fees, visa processing and travel expenses, and upfront

Often, there is no transparency in the calculation of recruitment cost related indebtedness or in setting timelines for recovering delayed wage payments.

incentives received before departing to a foreign country, which makes it nearly impossible for FDWs to leave abusive work environments. Although these incentives seem advantageous, sometimes they serve to imprison workers in exploitative surroundings by raising their financial dependence on employers and recruiters. If FDWs try to leave the employer, they are usually threatened with withheld wages or false debt claims associated with recruitment costs. Employers and agents exploit this dynamic by exaggerating the cost of return and creating a situation of debt bondage. Often, there is no transparency in the calculation of recruitment cost related indebtedness or in setting timelines for recovering delayed

wage payments. This financial entrapment, coupled with the fear of losing everything they have worked hard for, makes it difficult for many to leave the abusive workplaces despite the psychological and economic consequences this brings.

The psychological consequences associated with delays or non-payment of wages are on the one hand caused by the mistreatment of their employers representing a loss in income and a disregard for contractual agreements. Such delayed payment of wages often lacks transparency and fair practices regarding payment timelines. This scenario, which is a form of wage theft, leads to FDWs being subjected to verbal abuse and threats when requesting their wages, which further reinforces their vulnerability and fear of speaking out against such exploitation.

When remittances are delayed or irregular due to aspects of wage theft, the indebtedness-related vulnerabilities of the household amplify.

The other facet of emotional and psychological strain due to non-payment of wages is associated with the worker's inability to remit money back to the family left behind. Often, the remittances sent by migrant workers are an important portion of income for the family in Sri Lanka. The stress of not receiving wages on time or in full can lead to feelings of helplessness and depression when a FDW worker cannot exercise her responsibilities towards her family. Moreover, migration is often undertaken as a means of repaying pre-existing debts (GAATW, 2019). When remittances are delayed or irregular due to aspects of wage theft, the indebtedness-related vulnerabilities of the household amplify. The knowledge of the ripple effects caused by delayed or non-payment of wages greatly distresses migrant workers.

Table 9: Summary of Non-payment of Wages

Findings	Analysis	Triangulate with KII Findings
• FDWs face delayed, partial, or no wages. • They may be forced to buy supplies on their own. • Wage withholding is used to punish or control. • Delayed wage, leave FDWs financially uncertain and dependent.	• Wage theft traps FDWs in exploitation, as living with the employer, makes it hard to leave/refuse work without pay. • Overwork and underpayment make them more vulnerable. • Not sending money home causes guilt, stress, and family tension. • Debt, recruitment fees, and fake charges increase control and dependency.	• SLBFE officials report frequent wage complaints, often due to confusion over currency conversion. • Contracts are in SAR, but converted into LKR, leading to misunderstandings • Better pre-departure training is needed to clarify payment terms and currency conversions.

Source: Authors.

6.8 Communication Issues

In multiple cases, the ability of FDWs to use their mobile phones or other communication tools was severely limited. For instance, in Case 2, the worker is only allowed to make a phone call once a week at an inconvenient time (3:00 a.m.), which is not only a logistical challenge but also an emotional and psychological burden. Similarly, the FDW in Case 11 describes a situation where the worker's phone was confiscated after she was permitted to use it briefly to inform her family of her arrival. In other cases (28, 29, 40 and 41), workers have their phones taken away completely, preventing them from contacting their families or seeking help. As noted in Case 29, the employee travelled abroad two months prior and was able to communicate via phone for about a month. However, she was moved to a different workplace and has not been able to make phone contact since.

Some FDWs have limited information about their whereabouts. Similarly, when a FDW is deprived of communication, the family left behind has limited information about her whereabouts. For instance, in Cases 3 and 6, there was a complete breakdown in communication after a while, with no further contact or updates regarding the FDWs. In Case 26, the next of kin was unaware of her current workplace address, while the only information they had was that the FDW was located somewhere in Saudi Arabia. Such absence of communication leaves both the worker and her family vulnerable and creates confusion and distress for her family, who are left unaware of her safety or condition.

The manipulation of information is another key communication challenge. As noted in Case 31, after the employee experienced sexual harassment at her workplace, the sponsor transferred her to the foreign agent, where her access to communication was severely restricted. Her phone was confiscated by the hostel supervisor, cutting her off from contacting anyone in Sri Lanka. When she wanted to return home, the agency pressured her into recording false voice and video messages under threat to mislead her family left behind that she was in greater danger than she actually was. Subsequently, the local agent in Sri Lanka had used the false information to instil fear in the family and collected LKR 300,000 for the return of the FDW. Other issues related to communication include the possibility of

The possibility of employers viewing, blackmailing, communicating or sharing such audio or video footage of FDWs in their private spaces (i.e. in the bathroom), being beaten or having clothes ripped is another dimension of distress for FDWs.

employers communicating or sharing video footage of FDWs' in their private spaces (i.e. in the bathroom), or while being beaten or clothes being ripped (i.e. cases 16 and 31), and blackmailing (i.e. cases 42 and 4).

Such restrictions on communication is a critical issue faced by many FDWs, severely impacting their ability to maintain contact with their families, report their working conditions, and seek help in cases of exploitation or abuse. These restrictions are a direct form of control, as they limit the worker's autonomy and isolate them from their family and support networks. This practice is especially dangerous for workers who might be facing mistreatment, as it inhibits their ability to report abuse or seek assistance. Therefore, a communication barrier is not only a logistical challenge but also an emotional and

psychological burden to FDWs. Similarly, the manipulation of information creates distress among FDWs when misinformation is used to harass them or their families. At the same time, the use of communication devices to video and audio record FDWs are violations of FDWs' privacy. The possibility of employers viewing, blackmailing, communicating or sharing such audio or video footage of FDWs in their private spaces (i.e. in the bathroom), being beaten or having clothes ripped is another dimension of distress for FDWs.

Table 10: Summary of Communication Barriers

Findings	Analysis
• FDWs often face severe restrictions on using mobile phones. • Communication is allowed only at odd hours or is limited to brief contact. • Confiscation of phones shortly after arrival is common. • Communication breakdown leaves families in Sri Lanka unaware of the FDW's location or condition. • Workers are relocated or transferred without proper information being shared with families. • Manipulation and misuse of communication. • Use of surveillance, filming without consent in private areas, and blackmailing with recordings.	• Communication restrictions isolate FDWs and limit access to support or reporting abuse. • Emotional distress is heightened due to the inability to contact families or inform them of their condition. • Manipulation of communication is used to exploit both FDWs and their families. • Surveillance and unauthorized sharing of private content constitute a violation of privacy and contribute to mental trauma. • Reinforce the imbalance of power between FDWs and sponsors, further trapping the workers in abusive conditions.

Source: Authors.

7. Overarching Themes

7.1 Continuum of Violence

The foregone discussion on empirical evidence of SGBV brings out the interconnected nature of its various nuances. For instance, substandard accommodation that lacks safety and privacy creates a conducive environment for sexual harassment and subsequent mental distress. Similarly, when FDWs are provided with substandard accommodation or inadequate rest, they become overwhelmed with their workload and are vulnerable to physical harassment and related mental harassment. Verbal harassment often escalates to physical assault and sexual harassment. Restricting communication deprives FDWs of opportunities to access support for the SGBV they experience. As such, the SGBV issues faced by FDWs as discussed above are not as isolated incidents, but “events within a continuum of violence that they face throughout and in every aspect of their lives.” (GAATW, 2019). While this continuum can lead one aspect of SGBV to transcend into many other forms, addressing the root cause of this continuum can eliminate many aspects of SGBV. As such, understanding these interlinks is crucial in developing support mechanisms for FDWs affected by SGBV.

7.2 Economic Realities

The psycho-social aspects of the SGBV issues they experienced are highly linked to the economic realities of these FDWs. The empirical evidence emerging from this study underscores that these women’s exposure to SGBV tends to be “exacerbated by poverty” (GAATW, 2019). On the one hand, insufficient household incomes make left behind family members highly dependent on migrant workers’ remittances. On the other hand, migrant FDWs often originate from backgrounds of high indebtedness. As such, they have “extreme economic pressure to provide for families left behind” (GAATW, 2019). This pushes many FDWs to tolerate extreme levels of SGBV in fear of losing their jobs and the associated ability to support their family. Together with this heightened level of acquired tolerance, FDWs often delay seeking support for various issues they encounter while employed overseas. Many migrant workers continue to work despite non-payment of wages, in the hope of accessing their accumulated wages. Similarly, this tolerance, shaped by underlying economic factors, leads some workers to accept sub-optimal solutions rather than risk losing their employment. When foreign employment is sought under such trying economic circumstances, for many of these women, the decision to leave foreign employment early is only made when the difficult working conditions, mistreatment and harassment have pushed them beyond their threshold of endurance. However, the financial burden of returning home can be overwhelming. In contrast, the upfront recruitment incentive also compels FDWs to take on difficult working conditions, as they are financially burdened by the cost of securing their job, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia. FDWs who seek to return to Sri Lanka before completing their two-year work contracts often have to bear the full cost of their return journey. One example of reaching a sub-optimal solution was seen in Case 33. Here, the FDW’s issues of inadequate food and verbal abuse had ceased after the SLBFE officials spoke with their sponsor. However, the employer’s 17-year-old son

continued to engage in inappropriate behaviour by exposing himself to the FDW. The FDW in this case ultimately decided to reach a sub-optimal solution of continuing to work at the same workplace due to the lack of funds to cover the cost of repatriation. Consequently, she requested that the case file be closed. Unable to afford the cost of returning home, many continue to accept such sub-optimal outcomes to SGBV related issues. Therefore, understanding these economic realities is crucial to explaining why FDWs often find it difficult to accept or pursue the solutions provided to them.

7.3 Sector Informality

The vulnerability experienced by FDWs is largely shaped by the informality of the domestic sector and the immigration context related to the domestic sector in the Middle East. Until recently, due to traditional and cultural factors, domestic workers in the Middle East were not covered by labour laws. However, with the adoption of the ILO Convention on domestic workers No. 189 (C189) and Recommendation No. 201 at a global level have prompted the Middle Eastern countries to also take steps towards greater protection, though not ratifying C189. In this context, during the decade between 2011 (when the C189 was adopted) and 2021, “at least seven countries have included coverage of domestic workers” in various ways (ILO, 2021, p. 9). Bahrain covered domestic workers under several provisions of the general labour law, while Kuwait, Qatar and UAE introduced separate legislation on domestic work. Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Oman adopted specific subordinate regulations on domestic work (ILO, 2021).

Despite these measures, as seen in the foregone discussion, there is a high prevalence of SGBV among FDWs in the Middle East. One key reason is the limited implementation of these regulations. Within limited implementation, a key concern is the lack of consideration for households as places of employment. Thus, as highlighted by ILO (2021) “household labour inspections are challenging, as labour inspectors in the region typically need to obtain a judicial authorization to access a household, which undermines the possibility of undertaking routine inspections”. Even with legislation permits, labour inspectors in households are very rare.

Similarly, in the rare occasions that inspections are made, they are done by males, which undermines the gender sensitivity of the approach in these countries of destination for SGBV issues. These conditions in the Middle East contribute to the enabling environment for SGBV in households where FDWs are employed.

Until recently, due to traditional and cultural factors, domestic workers in the Middle East were not covered by labour laws.

7.4 Immigration Control

The immigration framework for domestic workers in many Arab States ties migrant FDWs to their employers or the Kafael (sponsor) through the Kafala System. To remain in the country, the FDW is required to have a working visa or be sponsored by a Kafael. Literature highlights that this nexus between the employer and the employee within the Kafala System places disproportionate power with the employer, with regard to employee’s possibility to

change employers, and residency and work permits. This leads to an FDW's dependence on a Kafeel and managing the related vulnerability. For instance, if a Kafeel refuses to renew a residency permit, a migrant FDW would become irregular. In this context, as noted by Bouri (2023) if a FDW attempts to run away from or leave an abusive employer, she is often treated with criminalization or deportation. These employment and power dynamics brought about by the immigration control mechanism, further contribute towards an enabling environment for SGBV within employers' households. Hence, the immigration control environment, including the Kafala System, facilitates abuse and exploitation. For FDWs the fear that they may be imprisoned or deported prevents them from leaving abusive and exploitative situations (GAATW, 2019).

In addition to contributory factors that originate from the employer, "certain social and cultural characteristics of the domestic workers themselves also play a role". For instance, FDWs are often low skilled with limited literacy levels, when coupled with language barriers to communicate in Arabic, such limited language capacity, skills and education contribute to difficulties in accessing information that is vital to efficiently and successfully performing the tasks assigned to her or seeking help if they are facing SGBV.

7.5 Diversity of Perpetrators

The perpetrators of this violence often include employers, their spouses, children and relatives, and officials in foreign or local recruitment agencies. For FDWs the relationship of the perpetrator with the employer makes it challenging to report or find redress to SGBV.

The perpetrators of this violence often include employers, their spouses, children and relatives, and officials in foreign or local recruitment agencies.

As discussed under the section on Sexual harassment, in many instances, the perpetrator was an immediate family member of the employer or the employer himself. This familial connection often discourages victims from speaking out due to fear of retaliation or dismissal. Moreover, when such abuse is reported to other family members, victims often don't get the help they need and may even face more problems or risks. Moreover, when the perpetrator is a national of the country of destination, the FDW does not have a level playing field in terms of language and social networks that play a role in complain handling mechanisms and the environment of the Middle East.

Recruitment agents, both local and foreign, who are often entrusted with facilitating the migration process, have also been significant perpetrators of violence. These agents may exploit migrant women by subjecting them to deceitful recruitment practices, forcing them into exploitative labour conditions, and even abusing them sexually or physically. As discussed above in Case 23, when the sponsor lady handed over the FDW to an agency without addressing the issue, the abuse continued at the agency as well. Moreover, as noted in Case 31, when the FDW reported to the foreign agent about being sexually assaulted by the owner of the house, instead of providing support or arranging a medical examination, the agency tried to force her into another job, and when she refused, she was beaten, detained, denied food, and cut off from communication. To make matters

worse, the agency recorded false videos and voice notes under duress and used these to manipulate her family in Sri Lanka. The local agency then demanded LKR 300,000 from her family to arrange her return. This case clearly shows how agents exploit the vulnerability of both the migrant and their family, using threats, false narratives, and financial manipulation to silence and control victims.

While men are often seen as the primary offenders, the abuse extends beyond gender, with female employers, their daughters or female wardens of hostels operated by recruitment agencies, subjecting these women to exploitation, harassment, and violence. The analysis of the complaints reveals clear gendered patterns in the types of abuse experienced by FDWs. Sexual harassment is predominantly perpetrated by males in the house, such as the sponsor, his sons, or other male relatives, including teenage boys and elderly men such as the sponsor lady's father. In contrast, physical and mental harassment is carried out by both male and female members of the employer's household. Female sponsors, sponsors' wives, and other housemaids are frequently reported to engage in verbal abuse, threats, or physical violence. As an example, in Case 4, the FDW was subjected to extreme physical abuse by the sponsor lady. The FDW was beaten with both hands and feet, struck with household items, pushed down a staircase, and even faced an attempt to be strangled, nearly to the point of death. Beyond physical violence, she endured constant verbal abuse, including vile language that insulted not only her personal dignity but also the values of her home country and religion. This female sponsor reportedly earned money by sending the worker to various other households for domestic work, effectively trafficking her labour.

The analysis of the complaints reveals clear gendered patterns in the types of abuse experienced by FDWs.

Similarly, individuals of all ages, including children, adults and elderly individuals, engage in inappropriate behaviour, contributing to the mistreatment of FDWs, particularly in

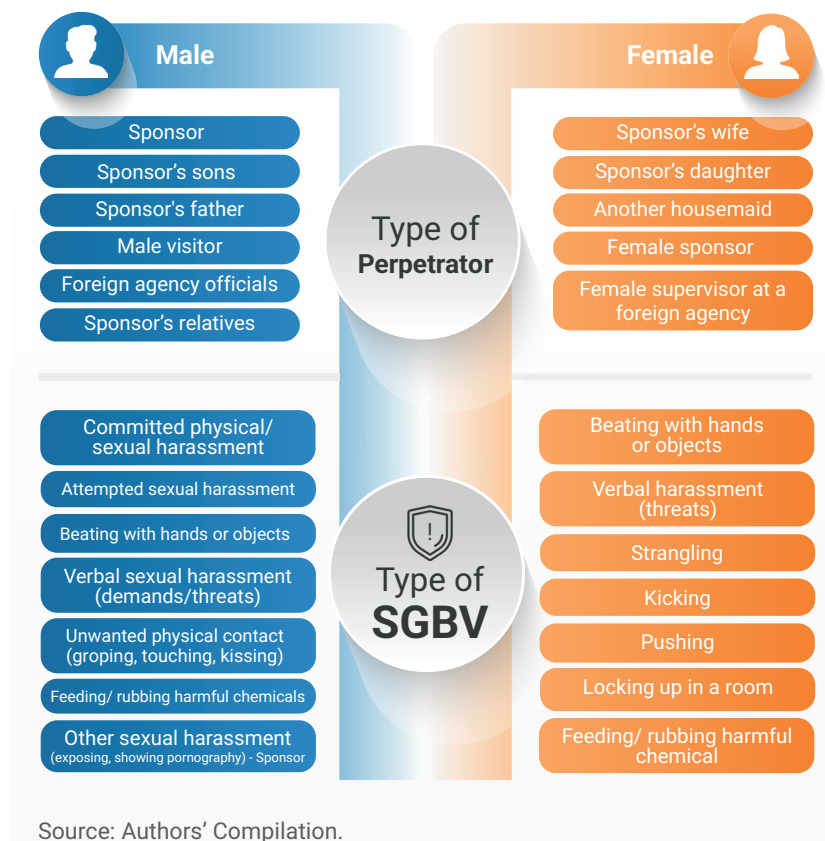
These cases highlight that when the abuser is in a position of power, like an employer or agent, reporting becomes extremely difficult due to fear, isolation, and lack of access to help.

environments where power dynamics and societal norms perpetuate a culture of abuse. These individuals abuse their power and authority over these women by taking advantage of their isolation in the country of destination. The broad range of perpetrators spanning genders, ages, and roles highlights the pervasive and systemic nature of SGBV faced by female migrant workers, demanding urgent attention and reform on multiple fronts. Some cases show that the type of perpetrator greatly affects the ability to make a complaint or find a solution. In Case 53, the sponsor's son was the abuser, and his position in the household allowed him to isolate the employee, restrict communication, and issue death threats, making

it hard for her to report the abuse. In Case 43, the perpetrators are both the local and foreign recruitment agents who misled the employee about her medical treatment, subjected her to confinement, threats, wage denial, and multiple forms of abuse. They not only misled the

employee but also threatened her and her family when concerns were raised. The agents' control over her location, documents, and movement further blocked any complaints. These cases highlight that when the abuser is in a position of power, like an employer or agent, reporting becomes extremely difficult due to fear, isolation, and lack of access to help. These cases show how the broad range of perpetrators, from employers' family members to recruitment agents, reflects the pervasive and systemic nature of abuse faced by migrant workers. These perpetrators operate across different stages of the migration process, showing how abuse is embedded in both domestic settings and recruitment systems. This pattern reveals that the issue is not isolated but rooted in a wider system that enables and protects abusers across borders.

Table 11: Diversity of Perpetrators



7.6 Capacity to Handle SGBV

For the SLBFE or the local or foreign agency to act on SGBV, as a first step, the violence has to be brought to notice by the FDW. The qualitative data reveals capacity limitations among FDWs to complain about SGBV. KIIs with SLBFE officials revealed that many FDWs leave for employment abroad without a clear understanding of their employment contracts, legal rights in the destination country, or the avenues available to report abuse. Several cases (Case 31, 16) demonstrated that FDWs tolerated harassment and other exploitative conditions due to a lack of awareness about how or where to seek help. The experience of Case 11 shows that, upon being sexually harassed, she filed a police complaint with the help of the foreign agent and underwent a medical examination, which confirmed the abuse. This led to the accused being found guilty and the FDW being promised compensation of SAR 50,000. However, upon visiting the foreign agency, she was denied the funds and offered only a return ticket to Sri Lanka. Her phone was confiscated after a single call to her family, cutting off communication. She was eventually repatriated without receiving any compensation, despite official documentation of the case. Moreover, upon return to Sri Lanka, the FDW in Case 11 had had consensual sexual relations with her fiancé, which made it impossible for her to provide additional medical reports. This emphasizes the capacity and awareness gaps among FDWs about SGBV and how to handle these situations. Similarly, several cases (i.e. Cases 31, 16) demonstrated that FDWs tolerated harassment and other exploitative conditions due to a lack of awareness about how or where to seek help.

Moreover, KIIs with SLBFE officials highlighted that confusion regarding salary terms, especially around the difference between SAR and LKR has led to misunderstandings and allegations of wage theft. For instance, suppose that the FDW had signed a contract stating she would receive a salary of SAR 1,200 per month. At the time of departure, the exchange rate was estimated to be 1 SAR = LKR 88, so the family expected remittances of approximately LKR 105,600 monthly. However, due to fluctuations in the exchange rate and bank fees, the actual amount received was around LKR 96,000, leading the family to believe she was being underpaid. This is commonplace, as many FDWs, especially those with lower educational backgrounds and rural areas, do not fully understand currency conversions or how their agreed salary translates into their home currency. This demonstrates how, even in cases where there has been no breach of contract, a lack of clarity and expectations that are expressed in LKR rather than SAR can result in misconceptions.

7.7 Inquiry and Conciliation

The inquiry process involves the relevant SLBFE officer gathering information about the complete account of the grievance from each of the parties - the complainant and the local agent. After reviewing their statements, the officer seeks to mediate an agreement between the parties. While there is no set duration for the entire process from filing a complaint to finding a solution, Conciliation Officer C was of the view that it takes approximately one month. On the other hand, Conciliation Officer D was of the view that the entire process, from filing a complaint to finding a solution, takes up to 3 months or less. He further explained that this period includes up to two weeks from filing a complaint; to send out

initial letters related to the inquiry, another month from there onwards to complete the inquiry, and another month to complete the remaining activities and close the complaint. These diverse views about the length of the conciliation process signify that each case is unique, demanding and challenging in its own way, leading to a varied duration to reach a settlement.

In conducting inquiries, the SLBFE faces many challenges. One challenge is the delay involved in working across multiple stakeholders scattered across two geographic areas. As noted by the Conciliation Officer C, one node for delays is when Sri Lankan embassies abroad are involved in the process. Another challenge is the language barrier as the employer speaks Arabic in most cases. To facilitate communication, SLBFE uses

One challenge is the delay involved in working across multiple stakeholders scattered across two geographic areas.

translators when communicating with employers and or foreign agents. Another challenge is separating genuine grievances from fabricated ones. The KII data reveals that that some complainants occasionally file false complaints, hoping to bring the worker back while retaining the high pre-departure recruitment incentive earned in countries like Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in some cases, there are discrepancies between the information provided at the time of registration of a migrant worker and at the time of filing a complaint.

The various complaints are handled and resolved in various ways as deemed necessary by their nature. As noted by the local agent interviewed, “the usual resolution for complaints is to transfer the migrant worker to a different household” and this process is expected to typically take at least one month. An extreme and more involved solution is repatriation of the FDW. Some other solutions attempted in the conciliation process include warning the sponsor or obtaining the agreement of sponsor to remedy the situation from their end.

7.8 Role of Foreign Agency

Recruitment agents, both in Sri Lanka and in the country of destination, have a large role to play in avoiding or minimizing SGBV faced by FDWs. However, the analysis of qualitative data highlights that the negligence or failure of recruitment agencies to adequately protect the rights of FDWs has contributed to aggravating FDW’s exposure to SGBV. This happens when the recruitment agency neglects or ignores providing the required support and protection for migrant workers, due to insufficient oversight, inadequate screening of employers, or a failure to address complaints of mistreatment. The set of standard questions in the SLBFE complaint form includes the following two: “Has the relevant agency been informed about this?” and “If the agency was informed, what action was taken by the agency?” The responses from all the complainants in this sample, where data is available on these questions, indicate that a migrant worker or family member had informed the agency. The fact that the migrant’s family or the migrant herself seeks the support of the SLBFE reflects that despite informing the issue to recruitment agent, the issues remained, necessitating informing SLBFE (see Annex). Timely and necessary action by the foreign agent, in many cases could have avoided the escalation of the issue into a full-blown case

of SGBV. In many cases, the foreign agent has sent the FDW back to the same house where she had previously worked and experienced harassment. Whether it was harassment, physical abuse, or sexual assault, the lack of support and follow-through reflects a systemic neglect of FDWs by recruitment agents. Moreover, the conduct of the recruitment agents also reflects that they are more concerned about protecting their financial interests and minimizing their liability than ensuring the safety and dignity of the workers they are responsible for. In this context, some agencies have resorted to intimidating and threatening migrant workers or their families from reporting the abuse to the SLBFE or pursuing legal action (Cases 13 and 35). These actions not only serve to silence the workers and their families but also highlight the power imbalance in the relationship between the agencies and the workers. The agencies, leveraging their control over the workers' employment and livelihoods, used threats to prevent any scrutiny of their practices, further reinforcing the cycle of abuse. Moreover, as noted in Case 31, when the FDW reported to the foreign agent about being sexually assaulted by the owner of the house, the agent had not subjected the FDW to a medical examination, but instead attempted to force her into working at another house under coercion. In this case, like the foreign agent, the local agent also has contributed to the harassment of the FDW, by misleading the FDW's family to extort money for her to return to Sri Lanka. This shows how recruitment agencies exploit the vulnerability of not only the migrant, but also that of the migrant workers' families. Such financial exploitation contributes to the overall systemic abuse migrant workers face, as they are often indebted to agencies and must work under severe conditions to repay debts.

However, the analysis of qualitative data highlights that the negligence or failure of recruitment agencies to adequately protect the rights of FDWs has contributed to aggravating FDW's exposure to SGBV.

8. Summary and Recommendations

8.1 Summary

Sri Lanka has a well-established and a well-functioning institutional support mechanism, headed by the SLBFE with the support of other stakeholders, to handle complaints by migrant workers. At the international level an equally strong international framework exists for protection, yet, SGBV continues to be a pressing issue faced by Sri Lankan FDWs.

The foregoing findings based on empirical analysis are consistent with previous literature which shows significant patterns of abuse, exploitation, and systemic neglect, encompassing physical, sexual, and psychological violence and harassment experienced by FDW (Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris, 2017; Weerasinghe and Wijewantha, 2023; Kouta, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2007; CS Lanka-SEDEC, 2012). Furthermore, consistent with previous literature, many workers experienced excessive workload, long working hours without rest, lack of rest days, deprivation of food and water, wage violations, including non-payment and underpayment, poor and unsafe working conditions, deteriorating health due to workplace conditions, lack of access to basic needs, communication barriers and violation of foreign employment agreements (Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2007; Weerasinghe and Wijewantha, 2023; ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, 2013; Kouta, 2021; CS Lanka-SEDEC, 2012). As such, the findings from this study shows the various nuances of SGBV faced by FDW in the post-pandemic setting are similar to the issues faced before the pandemic.

With the interest to improve the conditions for FDWs facing SGBV, this study contributes to the existing literature in its approach of examining the issue of SGBV from a combined framework of the world of work and human rights lenses. Moreover, overcoming data and methodological mis-matches in previous studies (Wickramage, De Silva, and Peiris, 2017; Weerasinghe and Wijewantha, 2023), the current study adopts a thematic analysis approach using rich qualitative data extracted from the SLBFE's CMS and KIs. Additionally, this study's empirical analysis relies on a data source not exploited in related studies. The uniqueness of this data source is its inclusion of information from the time of complaint, to the steps taken to resolve the issue. This goes beyond highlighting the issues faced by FDWs but also brings out the conciliation mechanisms adopted to resolve these. In doing so, the analysis identifies a large group of perpetrators and reflects on the challenges posed in arriving at a conciliation with regards to an SGBV issue. Understanding these challenges are important to recommend practical solutions.

As evident in the foregoing discussion, the risk factors for SGBV include both characteristics of the FDW, such as underlying economic characteristics, as well as that of employer/ his household. As such, the analysis in this study about SGBV experienced by FDWs is nuanced and includes violation of basic human needs such as food, accommodation and rest, violation of human rights to safety, privacy and dignity; exposure to physical, mental and sexual harassment; being deprived of communication and due wages in a timely manner and exposure to forced labour and deception. The broad range of perpetrators spanning genders, ages, and roles highlights the pervasive and systemic nature of SGBV faced by

female migrant workers, demanding urgent attention and reform on multiple fronts. Many of these issues faced by FDWs are interconnected and fall within a continuum, amplified by their socio-economic context in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the informality of the domestic sector in the Gulf countries and the modalities of the immigration context centred around the Kafala System and its role of the sponsor, further contribute to unfavourable migration outcomes experienced by FDWs. In many instances, timely and necessary action by the foreign agent would have avoided the escalation of an issue into a full-blown case of SGBV. Similarly, if the FDW as well as the foreign agent acted within the required framework, i.e. request and provide support, respectively, with the required medical tests and reports for sexual harassment cases, some FDWs could have had a strong case with evidence to obtain compensation from the employer/ perpetrator. In the absence of such concerted efforts by all stakeholders, FDWs end up being penalized in achieving an optimal resolution for the SGBV issues faced.

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8.2 Conclusion

The experiences shared by Sri Lankan FDWs in the Middle East, as discussed across the thematic sections of this study, are not isolated or individualised incidents. Instead, these are patterns deeply rooted in instructional inequalities and shaped by the vulnerabilities of being both a woman and a migrant. These experiences form part of a continuum of violence, where across every stage of the migration journey, from recruitment and departure to employment abroad, and even upon return, many of these women are subjected to multiple overlapping forms of SGBV. From the findings of this study, it's clear that the violations these women experience, such as being denied basic needs, being physically and mentally abused, forced to work long hours, misled during recruitment, being unpaid for their work, or cut off from communicating with their families, are not isolated. They are the result of power being misused by employers, recruitment agents, and even by systems that are meant to protect. Many of these women are live-in workers, which means their place of work is also where they eat, sleep, and try to rest, making it hard to escape or seek help when things go wrong. Meanwhile, immigration systems like the Kafala model grant employers' disproportionate control, heightening the risk of exploitation and preventing FDWs from seeking help without fear of retaliation. Each thematic area, whether it be inadequate rest, deception during recruitment, wage theft, or communication barriers, contributes to the normalization of abuse and illustrates how SGBV is deeply embedded in the working and living conditions of FDWs. The psychological consequences of not being able to support their families or return home, combined with social isolation and debt bondage, compound their susceptibility to coercion and silence. These findings align with GAATW (2019), which emphasize how power imbalances within households, communities, and migration systems create and sustain environments of abuse.

8.3 Recommendations

The above analysis points towards a few recommendations to enable FDWs to avoid SGBV as well as to improve the outcomes in conciliation. As noted by UNHCR (2011), these actions against SGBV can take a multi-sectoral approach involving health care, protection (including safety, security and legal support) and psychosocial support. As such, based on the foregone analysis, we identify that protection interventions in the best scenario ought to include a compendium of support along four pillars. They are 1. Pre-emptive risk identification mechanisms and awareness raising mechanisms; 2. Efficient and speedy reporting mechanisms; 3 Effective support structures for positive coping mechanisms; and 4. Binding penalty measures to prevent further incidence of SGBV.

Pillar 1: Pre-emptive Risk Identification Mechanisms and Awareness Raising Mechanisms

1.1. Develop a scorecard for post-arrival risk assessment for all FDWs based on assessing factors in the employers' household, such as quality of accommodation, safety and privacy of accommodation, quality and adequacy of food, access to communication, consistency of workload with agreed terms, adequacy of rest times and timely payment of wages.

- Ideally, the SLBFE ought to assess the SGBV risk factors in the place of employment within the first month of placement of an employee with a new employer.
 - The mechanism could be a telephone interview by an SLBFE official in Sri Lanka, or Labour Attache at the Sri Lankan Embassy at the country of destination or an online survey or a survey through social media to understand the risk level that contributes to potential SGBV exposure. Regardless of the data collection mechanism, it is crucial for the SLBFE to systematically track and identify FDWs employed under high-risk employers and to take pre-emptive protective measures to safeguard them. Equally important is the need for the SLBFE to monitor those who fail to respond to the post-arrival assessment, as such non-responsiveness may itself serve as a red flag indicating a potential risk of communication cut-off or isolation.
- 1.1.1. Based on the findings of the scorecard, provide additional awareness and guidance on protection measures for FDWs, and inform the employers and sponsors about the importance of ensuring better protection for the FDW.
 - 1.1.2. Place employers identified as high risk of inflicting SGBV on a watch list and provide additional information about how employees can minimize SGBV at places of employment.
 - 1.1.3. Re-assess these risk factors at reasonably regular intervals (e.g. every 3 or 6 months) and take appropriate follow-up action as necessary.

1.2. Reduce Deception and Forced Labour: At present the formal employment contract specifies the working conditions. However, the practicality of these matters is not evaluated. As such, it is recommended to develop a follow-up communication to compare actual working conditions in places of employment of FDWs with contract terms. This should involve information about the nature of work, number of hours worked, duration of rest periods, number and type of individuals in the household and tasks assigned etc.

1.2.1. Regular re-assessments at reasonable intervals such as every 3 or 6 months.

- Revamp education and awareness provided to FDW during pre-departure training about the necessary steps to take in case of SGBV.
 - Include showing videos of testimonials by SGBV survivors.
 - Discuss with potential migrant FDWs about what the FDW in the testimonial did right and wrong, what could have been done differently.
 - Provide the opportunity for potential migrants to role-play how to avoid and how to handle SGBV at the country of destination.
- Prepare a SGBV prevention leaflet to be kept in the possession of FDWs to be used when in country of destination.

1.2.2. The Sinhala and Tamil versions ought to be developed in a manner to help FDW's recap the related information they received in Sri Lanka during predeparture stage.

1.2.3. A version of this material should be developed in English, Arabic, and other relevant languages to highlight the importance of employers ensuring protection from SGBV.

- Instruct the FDW to share this leaflet with the employer upon arrival at the employer's residence.
- The contents to be communicated in an effective and assertive manner - not an aggressive tone.

Pillar 2: Efficient and Speedy Reporting Mechanisms

2.1. Adopt information and Communication Technology (ICT) Based Measures to Minimize Delays. Despite being largely successful, the current reporting mechanism for SGBV involves delays due to the involvement of stakeholders across multiple geographic areas (countries/cities). For instance, the SLBFE is in Colombo, while the migrant worker's family is in a rural area. Similarly, the employer may be in one city in the country of the district, while the foreign agent and the Sri Lankan mission might be far apart from the migrant worker. As such, ICT-based measures can be used more to improve the efficiency and speed of reporting.

2.1.1. Make greater use of video conferencing, recorded testimonials, recorded footage, etc., to speed up inquiries.

- All cases analysed in the study show that recruitment agents were informed before the SLBFE was notified. However, the fact that the migrant worker and her family also needed to report the issue to the SLBFE suggests that the reporting process must occur multiple times. In cases involving sensitive issues, the need to repeatedly explain the situation to several stakeholders can be particularly distressing and uncomfortable for the FDW. On the other hand, this pattern also reflects the failure of recruitment agents to address such issues efficiently and effectively.
- 2.1.2. As such, it is important to introduce a mechanism for recruitment agents to accept complaints and also inform/link it with the SLBFE complaint mechanism to avoid duplication of complaints.
- 2.1.3. Adopt greater use of ICT to speed up communication across stakeholder groups.
- 2.1.4. Adopt a framework for greater accountability of recruitment agents to solve and mediate complaints made to them. If such resolving or mediation is challenging, recruitment agents ought to be responsible enough to inform SLBFE about the complaint by the FDW, rather than disregarding the same.
- Introduce a mechanism for recruitment agents to escalate complaints beyond their capacity to be handled by the SLBFE.
- 2.1.5. Adopt a framework for greater accountability of each stakeholder for the time taken by their own institution towards delays and understand the reasons for delays.
 - Breakdown tasks and identify the time taken in each stage by each stakeholder and share this information relevant to cases monthly, with all stakeholders, in a transparent manner to identify delays.
 - Take necessary supportive and capacity-building measures to address these delays.
- 2.1.6. Increase the representation of female officers in handling SGBV-related cases, to improve ease of FDWs reporting an incident to a woman.

Pillar 3: Effective Support Structures for Positive Coping Mechanisms

3.1. Enhancing protection mechanism and accountability in SGBV cases involving FDWs. The foregoing analysis reflected how many FDWs were forced to go back and work for the same employer after a complaint/ inquiry of SGBV.

- 3.1.1. As such, it is important to make follow up inquiries to ensure that the SGBV related issue is solved to the satisfaction of the FDW. This requires:
 - A follow up mechanism with the FDW.
 - A follow up mechanism with the employer.

3.1.2. Introduce a mechanism for FDW's to report information about recruitment agents who did not solve a SGBV case to the satisfaction of the FDW.

- SLBFE to hold an inquiry regarding the recruitment agent.
- Place recruitment agents on a Blacklist if they have not taken appropriate protective measures.

3.1.3. Introduce options of free online counselling for FDWs who have experienced SGBV to support their coping mechanism.

- SLBFE to maintain a list of counsellors and refer to the relevant FDW's counsellor to host a selected number of sessions to improve their psychological well-being subsequent to an incident of SGBV. This facility should also be available to those who choose to be repatriated.

3.2. Facilitate affordable and safe repatriation. For many FDWs, when their preferred optimal solution was repatriation, they were compelled to take up the sub-optimal solution of changing the employer or worse, returning to the same employer due to financial difficulties in affording repatriation.

3.2.1. For those changing employers, provide psycho-social support to transition to a new work environment without inhibitions due to previous SGBV trauma.

- Involve social media related interactive sessions to provide such psycho-social support.
- Ensure safety and privacy. For those returning to the same employer, educate such FDWs to set effective boundaries with personal space, work role and other aspects of life in an assertive yet effective manner.
- Explore financial support options for FDWs traumatized by SGBV to be repatriated.
 - Explore the possibility of establishing a fund for repatriation with the support of migrant workers and recruitment agents.
 - Explore the possibility of the insurance scheme provided to migrant workers to cover repatriation costs.

Pillar 4. Binding Penalty Measures to Prevent Further Incidence of SGBV.

4.1. Introduce a framework to make foreign agent more accountable for their role in dismissing complaints, delaying inquiry and not facilitating required protocols for an inquiry, i.e. not taking a medical report for alleged sexual assault.

4.1.1. Currently, the SLBFE maintains a Blacklist of foreign and local recruitment agents who have reported incidents of misconduct in SGBV-related cases and cancels the license of offending local agents. In addition to this, it is important to also:

- Introduce an appropriate financial penalty for offending local and foreign agents.
- Make the Blacklist of recruitment agents public.

4.2. Introduce a framework to make foreign employers more accountable for protection from SGBV incidents.

4.2.1. Encourage and reward employers for ensuring their household is free from SGBV.

- Maintain a “Good Employer List” and initially inform employers in writing that they are placed in this list to encourage protective behaviour.
- Provide information for employers to conduct a self-assessment of their risk profile towards an environment to protect against SGBV.

4.2.2. Maintain a Blacklists of foreign employers who have proven and reported incidents of SGBV-related cases.

- Inform the employer in writing when they are placed on the Blacklist.
- Introduce appropriate financial penalties for all types of SGBV cases. Currently, financial compensation is provided only when a sexual harassment case is proven.
- Introduce a freeze on the ability to recruit workers from Sri Lanka for an appropriate duration of time.

4.3. Provide mechanisms to distinguish genuine from fabricated cases.

- Explore the possibility of introducing a more scientific mechanism to distinguish genuine cases from fabricated cases.

4.4. Introduce fines/ consequences for employees/ family members fabricating alleged cases of SGBV so that scarce resources at the SLBFE are not wasted on such fabricated cases.

- Introducing a Blacklist of migrant FDW
- Introduce a mechanism to charge a fine when cases are proven to be fabricated, to recover some of the administrative cost borne by SLBFE in investigating such claims.

Proposed Framework for Strengthening the Protection of FDWs Against SGBV	
Pillar 1: Risk Identification & Awareness • Post-risk arrival scorecard • Check in within 1 month + re-check every 3-6 months • Watchlist for high risk employers • Pre-departure awareness (survivor videos, role play, multilingual leaflets)	Pillar 2: Fast Reporting • Use ICT: video calls, recorded testimonies • Recruitment agents linked with SLBFE complaint system • Track delays by stakeholders • Increase female officers for SGBV cases
Pillar 3: Support & Coping • Follow-up with FDW + employer until resolved • Blacklist negligent recruitment agents • Free online counselling & psychosocial support • Repatriation fund + insurance options • Boundary-setting guidance for FDWs returning to same employer	Pillar 4: Penalties & Accountability • Blacklist + fine negligent agents (make lists public) • Good Employer List + blacklist abusive employers • Tools to filter genuine vs fabricated complaints • Penalties for fabricated complaints

Future research in this area could be in terms of pre-emptively identifying migrant FDWs at high risk for SGBV before departure, while they are in Sri Lanka.

- The SLBFE's existing pre-departure training provides awareness and knowledge about how to avoid and handle SGBV. Building on this, based on the findings emerging from this study, it is recommended that an analysis be conducted to determine risk factors associated with SGBV among migrant workers, in order to develop a related risk profile/ scorecard at pre-departure stage.
- Such research could facilitate placing FDW at high risk for SGBV in a Protective List, and provide additional observations and support, regularly upon their arrival in the country of destination, to ensure that they do not actually face SGBV.
 - Identify a cut-off threshold for high risk FDWs for SGBV.
 - Involve labour attaché in Sri Lankan embassies abroad to make follow-up calls to employer and employee to make a follow up assessment to understand any changes in the SGBV risk profile of these FDW in the Protective List.

Annex

Annex 1: Summary of KIIs Conducted

Name	Relationship to Migrant	Representative	Gender	Scope
A	SLBFE	Conciliation Manager I	Male	Handles Saudi and Kuwait
B	SLBFE	Conciliation Manager II	Female	Handles Other Countries
C	SLBFE	Conciliation Officer	Female	Handles Saudi
D	SLBFE	Conciliation Officer	Female	Handles Kuwait
E	SLBFE	Conciliation Officer	Male	Handles Saudi
F	SLBFE	Administrative Officer	Female	Complaint Receiving Unit
G	Local Agent	Local Agent	Male	Local agent
H	Migrant's husband	Migrant's husband	Male	Migrant's husband

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Annex 2: Descriptive Statistics of Cases

Case No:	Country	Complaint Type	Survivor's Details				NOK's Relationship to the Victim	Gender of the Officer
			Age (Yrs)	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Residence		
1	Saudi	Labor exploitation/ Mental Stress/No Food/ No medicine	N/A	Tamil	Married	Colombo	Husband	Female
2	Saudi	Harassment/No medicine/Non-payment of wages	N/A	Muslim	Married	Colombo	Husband	Male
3	Saudi	Harassment/No information	N/A	Sinhala	Married	N/A	Mother	Male
4	Saudi	Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	N/A	N/A		Female
5	Saudi	Harassment	N/A	Muslim	Married	N/A	Husband	Female
6	Saudi	Harassment/No information	N/A	Muslim	N/A	N/A		Female
7	Saudi	Harassment	N/A	Muslim	Married	N/A	Husband	Female
8	U.A.E	Harassment/Nonpayment of wages	N/A	N/A	Married	N/A	Daughter	N/A
9	U.A.E	Harassment	N/A	Muslim	Married	N/A	Husband	Female
10	Saudi	Harassment/Sickness (Mental Distress)	36	Tamil	Married	Kalutara	Sister	Male
11	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	30	Sinhala	Married	Kegalle	In-Law	Male
12	U.A.E	Harassment	49	Sinhala	Married	Kandy	Son	Female
13	U.A.E	Harassment/ Breach of employment contract/ Sickness	44	Sinhala	Divorced	Kurunagala	Father	Female
14	Saudi	Harassment/ Too much work	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Kalutara	Husband	Female
15	Saudi	Harassment/ Non-receipt of wages	39	Sinhala	Married	Kalutara	Son	Male
16	Saudi	Harassment/ Non-receipt of wages/Too much work	54	Sinhala	Married	Colombo	Daughter	Female
17	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Harassment/ Sickness	24	Tamil	Married	Kandy	Mother	Female
18	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Sickness/ Breach of Contract	47	Sinhala	Married	Colombo	Son	Female
19	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Polonnaruwa	Husband	Male
20	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Kalutara	Husband	Female
21	Saudi	Harassment	50	Sinhala	Separated	Kandy	Son-in-law	Female
22	Saudi	Harassment/ Breach of Contract	48	Sinhala	Married	Colombo	Husband	Male
23	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Kalutara	Husband	Male
24	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Gampaha	Brother	Male
25	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Breach of Contract	36	Tamil	Married	Nuwara Eliya	Sister	Female

26	Saudi	Harassment/ Sickness/Breach of Contract	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Galle	N/A	Female
27	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Too much work	42	Sinhala	Married	Nuwara Eliya	N/A	Female
28	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Assault/ Inquiries	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Anuradhapura	Husband	Female
29	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	Married	Kalutara	Husband	Male
30	Saudi	Harassment/ Too much work	48	Sinhala	Separated	Anuradhapura	Daughter	Female
31	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Breach of Contract	41	Sinhala	Unmarried	Mathale	N/A	Female
32	Saudi	Sexual Harassment (Assault)	39	Tamil	Married	Mathale	Daughter	Female
33	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	N/A	Sinhala	N/A	Kandy	Husband	Female
34	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ No Communication	35	Sinhala	Divorced	Anuradhapura	Daughter	Female
35	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	28	Sinhala	Married	Hambantota	Husband	Female
36	Saudi	Sexual Harassment/ Harassment	N/A	Muslim	N/A	Kegalle	Husband	Female
37	Saudi	Sexual Harassment	28	Tamil	Married	Batticaloa	Husband	Male
38	Kuwait	Sexual Harassment/ Sickness/ Breach of Contract	43	Sinhala	Divorced	Matara	Sister	Female
39	Kuwait	Sexual Harassment/ Non-payment of wages	50	Tamil	Married	Rathnapura	Husband	Female
40	Kuwait	Harassment/ Non-payment of wages	47	Sinhala	Divorced	Colombo	Husband	Female
41	Kuwait	Harassment	32	Sinhala	Divorced	Colombo	Daughter	Female
42	Kuwait	Harassment/No food/No communication	N/A	N/A	Married	N/A	Husband	Female

Note: N/A: Not Available in the complaint form / Not uploaded the complaint form to the system.

Source: Authors' tabulation based on qualitative data.

Annex 3: Summary of Complaint Handling Mechanism and Solution

Case	Country	Complaint Status	Complaint Type	Local Agent Aware	Willing to Pay for Repatriation	Requested Solution	Final Solution
1	Saudi	Ongoing	Labor exploitation/ Mental Stress/No Food/ No medicine	Yes	N/A	Immediately change the workplace of the employee before the occurrence of any loss of life/ Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
2	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment/ No medicine/Non-payment of wages	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
3	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassments/No information	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
4	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment	Yes	N/A	Change the workplace of the employee/ Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
5	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment	N/A	N/A	Change the workplace of the employee immediately	Ongoing Case
6	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassments/ No information	N/A	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
7	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment	Yes	Yes	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
8	U.A.E	Ongoing	Harassment/ Nonpayment of wages	Yes	N/A	Salary payment for 3 years (Obtaining back wages)/ Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
9	U.A.E	Ongoing	Harassment	Yes	No	Immediate solutions for the problems faced by the employee/ Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
10	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment/ Sickness (Mental Distress)	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
11	Saudi	Ongoing	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
12	U.A.E	Closed	Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL

13	U.A.E	Closed	Harassment/ Breach of employment contract/ Sickness	Yes	Yes	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
14	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment/ Too much work	Yes	N/A	Change the workplace of the employee immediately/ Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
15	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment/ Non-receipt of wages	Yes	No	Obtaining Back Wages and Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
16	Saudi	Ongoing	Harassment/ Non-receipt of wages/Too much work	Yes	Yes	Changing the workplace of employment with back wages/ Obtaining Back Wages and Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case
17	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Harassment/ Sickness	Yes	No	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
18	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Sickness/ Breach of Contract	No	Yes	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
19	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	N/A	N/A	Changing the workplace of employment immediately	The employee was repatriated to SL
20	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	No	Repatriation to SL	Changed the workplace.
21	Saudi	Closed	Harassment	Yes	N/A	Changing the work of employment with back wages/ Obtaining Back Wages and Repatriation to SL	The employee is willing to continue the work at the same workplace
22	Saudi	Closed	Harassment/ Breach of Contract	Yes	Yes	Repatriation to SL	Employee is willing to continue the work at the same workplace
23	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
24	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Changed the workplace
25	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
26	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	No	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL

27	Saudi	Closed				Repatriation to SL	No response from the complainant for a long time
28	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Assault/ Inquiries	Yes	No	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
29	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	No response from the complainant for a long time
30	Saudi	Closed	Harassment/Too much work	Yes	No	Change the workplace of the employee immediately	The employee is willing to continue the work at the same workplace
31	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Breach of Contract	Yes	N/A	Refund of personal funds of Rs. 300,000/= paid for the employee's repatriation to SL, to claim the insurance benefits, and to initiate Legal action against the local agency that committed this fraud	The employee is willing to continue the work at the same workplace
32	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Assault	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	-
33	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	N/A	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee is willing to continue the work at the same workplace
34	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Lack of Communication	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
35	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL/ Change the workplace of the employee immediately	The employee was repatriated to SL
36	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Harassment	N/A	N/A	Repatriation to SL	The employee was repatriated to SL
37	Saudi	Closed	Sexual Harassment	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL (If a medical examination confirms that she is unable to work)	Changed the workplace

38	Kuwait	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Sickness/ Breach of Contract	N/A	N/A	Repatriation to Sri Lanka/ Obtaining back wages	The employee had agreed to continue working to earn the required funds for her repatriation
39	Kuwait	Closed	Sexual Harassment/ Nonpayment of wages	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to Sri Lanka/ Obtaining back wages for one month	The employee had agreed to continue her work at the same house. Subsequently, the complainant informed that all issues had been resolved
40	Kuwait	Closed	Harassment/ Nonpayment of wages	Yes	N/A	Changing the workplace of employment immediately with back wages	The employee was repatriated to Sri Lanka
41	Kuwait	Closed	Harassment	Yes	Yes	Repatriation to Sri Lanka	The employee was repatriated to Sri Lanka
42	Kuwait	Ongoing	Harassment/No food/ No communication	Yes	N/A	Repatriation to SL	Ongoing Case

Note: N/A: Not mentioned in the complaint form / Not uploaded the complaint form to the system.

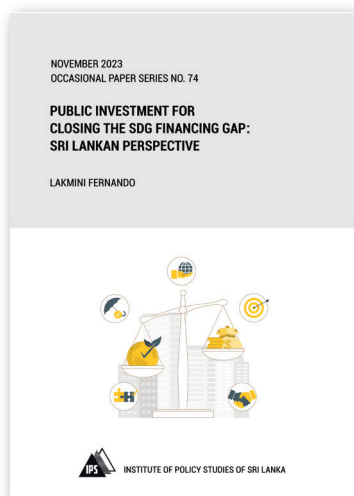
Source: Authors' compilation based on qualitative data.

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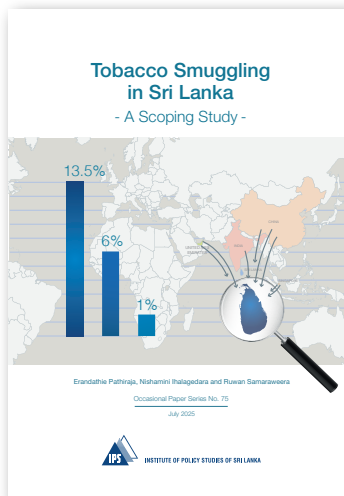
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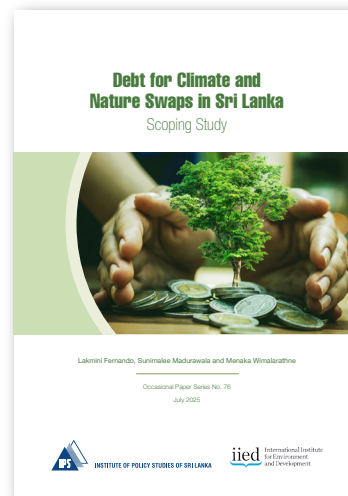
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