The Paradox Of "Skill": A Study of Gendered Experiences of North Indian Women Migrant Workers in United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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Dedicated to Ma, Papa and Baba

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List of Acronym

GAMCA- Gulf Approved Medical Center Association

GCC- Gulf Cooperation Council

ILO- International Labor Organizations

IT- Information and Technology

MBA- Master of Business Administration

TB- Tuberculosis

UAE- United Arab Emirates

UNDESA- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Abstract:

This research paper examines how does “skill” shape gendered experiences of the North Indian female migrants working in Information and Technology (IT) sector in UAE at the intersections of gender, class, race, nationality. To understand this, the paper explores Valuation and devaluation of skill in the home and host country. Drawing the social construction of skill framework (Steinberg, 1990; Liu-Farrer et al., 2021) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), this study analyses how skill recognition is mediated through gendered expectations operating at multiple scales. The study uses the primary data collected from qualitative interviewing and secondary data sources. Through examining the case of North Indian female migrants working in IT sector in UAE, this study demonstrates how gendered skill recognition operates across professional contexts in both home and host countries. It contributes to migration scholarship by revealing how public discourse on skilled migration reproduces gender hierarchies through ostensibly neutral categories of skill and merit.

Keywords: Migration, Intersectionality, High-Skilled migration, India-UAE migration, Gender and technology, social construction of skills, skill recognition, skill devaluation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

According to the latest report of International Labour Organization (ILO), over 167.7 million people around the world work as migrants, and 38.7 % of them are women which is nearly half of the total migrant population (ILO, 2024). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been a prominent destination of migration especially for the South Asian Diaspora. The Indian diaspora in the gulf is one of the largest. Around 9 million Indians reside and work in different sectors of the gulf economy (Gulf news, 2024). The UAE hosts the maximum number of Indian job seekers which is approx. 3.55 million (Gulf news, 2024). Indian migrate to gulf for better opportunities. The remittances sent by them contributes to the Indian economy. India received nearly $119 billion in remittances, with more than a third coming from the Gulf (Gajbhiye et al., 2025).

1.1.1 A shift from conventional to Digital economy

There is shift in Gulf migration patterns. Followed by the oil boom in the 1960s. the gulf region has invited many migrant workers especially in the construction workers, domestic helpers and many other. However, a new wave of professionals is changing the landscape. The Gulf countries are rapidly digitizing their economies which opened doors for the high skilled professionals as well. The report commissioned by Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy (in partnership with Entrepreneur Middle East) shows that the UAE's digital economy — currently valued at nearly US $38 billion — is projected to grow to over US $140 billion by 2031(Gulf News, 2023). Omar Sultan Al Olama who is the Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications (and the Chairman of the Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy) highlights that this leap means the digital economy's share of the UAE's GDP will go from 9.7 % up to over 20 % by 2031 (Gulf News, 2023). Further, he stated that "Raising the business community's awareness about challenges and future trends is a key priority, as is highlighting the importance of digital transformation as an engine of sustainable growth for the business sector." (Gulf News, 2023) The rise of the UAE's startup ecosystem — notably, in 2022, startups raised US $2 billion, more than double the amount in 2021. Since 2017, roughly 96 % of all funds raised in the UAE by startups were based in Dubai. (Gulf News, 2023). Omar also said that "Our strategic plans will also focus on achieving the objectives of the Dubai Economic Agenda (D33), especially in terms of driving digital transformation, developing a sustainable

business sector, and adding an average of Dh100 billion per year in economic value to the emirate's economy," (Gulf News, 2023).

It can be said that digital transformation is largely being built by the migrants. In the UAE's private sector, more than 88% of workers are foreign-born, with Indian professionals forming the largest expatriate community (UN DESA, 2022).

1.2 About This Research

1.2.1 Statement of Problem

Despite the increasing visibility of Indian women migrants in the Gulf, their experiences remain under-researched and under-theorized. The existing scholarship on feminization of migration often portrays women either as victims or as empowered. However, this binary sometimes overlooks the complex and contradictory realities women migrant face. North Indian women working in I.T. sector in UAE occupy an ambiguous position—they do not fit neither in the "exploited unskilled worker" narrative nor the "highly privileged expatriate" category because of the factors like gender, class, nationality and race. Their experiences reveal how professional credentials are filtered through nationality-based hierarchies, and how gender intersects with both to create specific forms of workplace marginalization even within high-skilled sectors.

In order to understand these intersections requires moving beyond single-axis analyses to examine how skill recognition, professional identity, and labour market positioning are simultaneously shaped by multiple factors.

1.2.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of the research is to study how does "skill" shape gendered experiences of the North Indian female migrants working in IT sector in UAE at the intersections of gender, class, nationality. My main research question is:

What are the gendered experiences of the North Indian female IT employees in UAE?

To examine, I will attempt to answer the following two sub-questions

a) How do North Indian female IT employees experience skill recognition and workplace discrimination in the UAE? How does it compare with their experience in the home county?

b) How do North Indian female IT employees navigate family expectations and cultural norms while working in the UAE?

These sub-questions will allow me to explore valuation and devaluation of skills at the intersection of gender, nationality, and regional origin and how it affects their career advancement bringing multiple workplace challenges. Additionally, it will help in understanding the family, cultural and social experiences and how they adapt and navigate adapt to UAE's cultural norms (dress codes, gender segregation) while maintaining their Indian identity.

1.2.2 Justification and Relevance

This research addresses a critical gap at the intersection of different bodies of literature namely feminization of migration, skill and labour, and scholarship on Gulf migration systems. Their limited integration has obscured crucial dynamics shaping female professional migrants' experiences—particularly how skill recognition operates differently across home and host contexts, and how this recognition is mediated by intersecting hierarchies of class, nation, gender, and race. For Indian women professionals in the Gulf, skill recognition becomes a complex negotiation across multiple scales: within transnational corporations that may value their qualifications differently than local employers; within host societies where nationality and gender intersect to structure labor market access; and within their own families and communities, where their professional status may challenge or reinforce existing gender norms.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

1.3.1 Moving Beyond Heroes and Victims Binary

As mentioned above in the problem statement section, the binary of heroes and victims come into play whenever we talk about professional women migrants. Either they're celebrated as empowered women who broke the glass ceilings and sending money home to transform their families' lives back home. Or they are framed as victims (sometimes villains) in case of transnational motherhoods discussed by Parreñas (2001) in case of Filipino migrants. However, women lived experiences do not entirely fit into this binary. For instance, In case my research participants who might feel recognized or earn praise for her hard work in the office might be perceived as bad person for neglecting her family back home. But, in addition to this, despite, she can afford to support her family back home because of the better pay, she

might still earn less than male colleagues with equivalent qualifications which adds another layer to it.

To understand this complexity, this research weaves together three analytical lenses that help us see beyond the hero/villain binary. Each framework illuminates a different dimension of how professional migrant women navigate recognition, belonging, and power across borders.

1.3.2 The Social Construction of Skill

Ronnie Steinberg's (1990) work is considered as groundbreaking scholarship. It argued that when women do certain kinds of work, it gets systematically undervalued as opposed to similar work done by men. For example, jobs like care work have historically been stereotyped as having natural ‘feminine instincts’ rather than learned professional competencies deserving equal compensation. Meanwhile, physically demanding but technically straightforward jobs coded as "masculine" command higher pay and status.

This phenomenon is not limited to gender bias in workplaces but about how entire societies construct categories of "skilled" and "unskilled" work in ways that serve existing power structures (Steinberg, 1990, pp. 449-482).

In the recently published article, Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas (2021) extended this framework to understand how skill gets recognized (or doesn't) across borders. They have argued that when a professional woman migrates, her qualifications pass through multiple "arbitrators of skill" namely immigration officials deciding visa categories, employers assessing her credentials, professional associations determining license equivalencies, even recruitment agencies positioning her in the market (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, & Baas, 2021, pp. 2237-2251). Each of these gatekeepers operates within hierarchies that rank certain nationalities, races, and genders as inherently more or less skilled, regardless of actual capabilities. This would mean that an Indian woman for instance, with relevant degree and few years of experience working in home country, might be classified as "highly skilled". However, she might still face credential skepticism from UAE employers who question non-Western education, and faces pay disparity within identical roles. This is the result of the different power relations at play that govern skill recognition at each stage.

1.3.3 The Feminization of Migration

The "feminization of migration" extends beyond demographic shifts in migrant populations; it signifies a fundamental transformation in migration patterns, motivations, and outcomes

(Castles & Miller, 2009; Pessar & Mahler, 2003). The shift has created new opportunities for women's autonomous migration, where women exercise agency, marking a departure from historical patterns wherein women predominantly migrated as dependents of male migrants (Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Zlotnik, 2003). According to Pessar's work (2005) the feminization of migration lens reveals that women's professional mobility constitutes more than individual choice or economic strategy. It acts as catalyst for restructuring families, communities, and gender relations on a global scale. For Indian women professionals in UAE technology sectors, this theoretical framework illuminates how their migration is interpreted not merely as individual career advancement but as emblematic of transforming Indian womanhood (Radhakrishnan, 2009; Walton-Roberts, 2012).

1.3.4 Concept of Intersectionality

Black feminist scholarship, particularly Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) foundational theorization of intersectionality, provides a critical analytical framework for understanding how individuals' experiences cannot be comprehended through examination of singular identity categories. Crenshaw coined the terms intersectionality and defined "lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects". Gender does not operate independently of race, class, nationality, religion, or legal status; rather, these dimensions of identity and systems of power intersect, producing distinctive experiences that cannot be captured through additive models examining factors in isolation (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242).

In my research paper, intersectionality for professional women migrating from India to the can be examined across multiple axes namely gender positioning, nationality, class stratification, religious identity and many other.

Collins and Bilge (2016) conceptualize intersectionality as both analytical tool and critical praxis. As analysis, it illuminates how power operates through multiple, mutually constitutive systems. As praxis, it demands reflexive interrogation: whose voices are centred in research and policy formulation, whose experiences are rendered invisible, how might solidarities be constructed across different forms of marginalization (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 31).

1.3.5 Towards integrated approach

In this research paper, I will employ these three theoretical lenses as complementary rather than competing frameworks. Integrating these lenses will enable a multi-dimensional analysis.

1.4 Organisation of the research paper

In this introductory chapter, I have discussed the background, research question and outlined the conceptual framework of this research. Following this, Chapter 2 will provide the review of literature. Chapter 3 will discuss the adopted methodology, and include a personal reflection on positionality and ethics. Chapter 4 delves into the findings and analysis which is divided into multiple sections. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I have examined three interconnected areas of research that are crucial for understanding my research question: feminist migration studies, the sociology of work and skill construction, and intersectional approaches to migration. I have divided the chapter into following sections- In the first section, I have provided historical context for female migration from India to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with particular focus on the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The second section engages with existing scholarship on feminization of migration. Following this, the third section deals with the social construction of skill. The last section focuses on the intersectionality in the gulf context. All these sections are further divided into multiple subsections.

2.1 Historical Context: Migration to the Gulf as a Colonial Legacy

Indian migration to gulf region has its roots in the colonial history. Tinker (1974) provides a historical account of Indians coming, particularly from regions like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar in the north, how they were transported under exploitative indenture contracts that bound them to work for years in foreign lands. During the late 19th century, there were significant changes in migration patterns from India. It is interesting to note in Amba Pande's (2018) work that the colonial state organized mass labour migration through systems like indenture, maistry, and kangani, which facilitated the movement of workers to Southeast Asian plantations what Amrith (2011) has described this period as the beginning of "Asia's mobility revolution".

The women participated significantly in these migration streams, though their roles were often marginalized and historical narratives depicted as women migrant as passive participant lacking agency. Lal (2006) has shown in his work that women constituted up 40% of the workforce. They initially were viewed as "unproductive," however; became integral to the workforce due to their lower wages and contributions to social stability (Gunpunth, 1984; Emmer, 1986).

After the oil boom in the gulf region in the 1960s, migration to the GCC was shaped by poverty, unemployment, and the search for better economic opportunities. This was in stark opposition to the coercive nature of indentured labour. Weiner (1995) has shown how migration to the Gulf became largely voluntary, facilitated by recruitment agencies and personal networks.

2.2 Feminisation of Migration Studies: Toward gender sensitive approach

2.2.1 Early Migration Theory and Its Limitations

The classical migration theories focused more on economic factors responding to wage differentials and labour demand, without considering how gender shapes migration patterns and experiences (Massey et al., 1993, p. 432). Ravenstein's (1885, p. 199) work reflects on how classical "laws of migration" mentioned women only to note they migrate shorter distances than men underlining the assumptions that male migration was the norm while female mobility was exceptional. Neoclassical economic models assumed rational actors maximizing income, however, they ignored how patriarchal household structures constrain women's ability to pursue economic opportunities (Stark & Bloom, 1985, p. 174).

The domain of feminist scholarship from the 1980s brought many scholars who challenged this androcentrism. They documented that women have always migrated in large numbers, often independently rather than as dependents of male migrants (Morokvasic, 1984, p. 886; Phizacklea, 1983, p. 3). This type of migration was shaped by gender-specific labor demands for example, domestic service and care work, nursing. This resulted in the migration scholarship which was not solely centred around male (Sassen, 1984, p. 1155).

Pedraza's (1991, p. 304) has argued that "women's migration is not caused by the same factors as men's migration" which enunciate and solidify the female migration debate.

2.2.2 The Feminization of Migration

Migration scholars through the 1990s recognized that international migration was undergoing significant feminization, with women constituting growing proportions of migration flows and increasingly migrating independently for work rather than family reunification (Zlotnik, 2003, p. 1; Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 16). It was particularly because of the increasing demand for care work in aging societies, expansion of service sectors employing women, and women's own strategies for economic advancement (Piper, 2005, p. 4). Hochschild's (2000, p. 131) concept of "global care chains" is particularly insightful for understanding the gendered dimensions of this phenomenon. Another scholar, Parreñas (2001, pp. 361-362) provides ethnographic account of Filipina domestic workers discuses "transnational motherhood." showing how women maintained maternal relationships across vast distances through remittances and phone calls while caring for other women's children.

While early feminization research focused on domestic workers, migration of high-skilled female professional was less discussed but reveals distinct challenges despite educational credentials (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005, p. 151; Raghuram, 2004, p. 289). Kofman's (2000,

p. 55) works argues that skilled migration categories systematically privilege masculine-coded professions like engineering and IT over feminized professions like nursing and teaching, which are classified as "semi-skilled" regardless of the education required. This reflects on how skilled is not independent unit of merit but rather informed by others factors like gender. Similarly, Hawthorne (2001, p. 89) that despite having equivalent or superior credentials to male counterparts, women experienced higher rates of unemployment and credential devaluation in Australia. Man (2004, p. 136) has described it as a systematic institutional discrimination rather than individual inability.

Additionally, the "trailing spouse" phenomenon discussed that Yeoh and Khoo (1998, p. 156) helped me understand the how women accept below their qualification levels, losing economic independence and career momentum (Riaño et al., 2015, p. 189) which exemplifies how gender structures skilled migration in ways that systematically disadvantage women.

2.3 The Social Construction of Skill

2.3.1 Understanding Skill as Socially Constructed

I have discussed the social construction of skill the conceptual framework section in Chapter 1 as well. "Skill" is socially constructed through power relations that systematically advantage men while disadvantaging women (Steinberg, 1990, p. 451; Phillips & Taylor, 1980, p. 79). Steinberg's (1990, p. 452) has argued that "skill definitions reflect the sex, race, and class of those who perform the work, not the content of the work itself." She has discussed in her work how jobs performed predominantly by women are systematically undervalued which occurred in my interviews as well. Steinberg (1990, p. 465) stresses in her work how evaluations treat women's abilities as natural personality traits rather than learned competencies deserving compensation. In line of her argument, it can be seen how nurturing and empathy in childcare are treated as innate feminine qualities rather than professional skills requiring training (England et al., 2002, p. 455). Steinberg (1990, p. 486) has given example of manual dexterity in garment sewing is deemed unskilled which requires extensive training. Another example discussed by her is regarding how interpersonal skills in administrative work are dismissed as "personality" rather than competencies in relationship management (Steinberg, 1990, p. 468). The work performed by men receives skill recognition even when objectively simpler. Cockburn (1983, p. 113) found that male-dominated trade jobs were classified as highly skilled based on physical strength requirements, while more complex care work was deemed unskilled. Cockburn (1983, p. 115)

asserts that the key variable was not job content but workers' ability to claim skill status through unionization and cultural narratives linking masculinity with competence.

Liu-Farrer et al.'s (2021, pp. 2241-2243) work on international migration is particularly useful for my research. They identified multiple actors who define and evaluate skill recognition. Skill emerges from negotiations among various stakeholders and do not solely defined by objective criteria applied. This insight has profound implications for Indian professional women migrating to the Gulf. For example, Raghuram (2013, p. 142).
women degrees from prestigious Western institutions carry more weight than identical qualifications from Global South universities, reflecting ongoing colonial hierarchies in knowledge systems

2.3.2 Gender and Skill in Technology Sectors

Since I am researching on professional women in sectors like IT and business, I will briefly discuss literature on gender and technology as well. I.T. sector has been presented as a meritocratic field where technical competence determines success regardless of gender (Ensmenger, 2010, p. 116). Regardless, I.T. is stereotyped as masculine domain for the longest time. However, Hicks's (2017, pp. 2-4) historical documentation showed that women were central to early computing, working as programmers when these jobs were considered clerical work. As computing gained prestige and economic value, professional associations systematically pushed women out through discriminatory hiring and hostile workplace cultures. IT workplaces remain characterized by masculine cultures that disadvantage women (Wajcman, 2010, p. 145). These include long hours expectations, aggressive communication styles, and "bro culture" socializing where professional networking occurs but women feel excluded (Ensmenger, 2010, p. 127). I was particularly struck by research showing that identical code contributions receive lower quality ratings when attributed to women versus men (Terrell et al., 2017, p. 1). This demonstrates how gender bias operates even in supposedly objective technical evaluations.

2.4 Understanding Intersectionality in the Gulf Context

My research uses intersectionality as one of the analytical frameworks. I have defined intersectionality earlier in Chapter 1, Intersectionality in this case suggests that women's experiences vary significantly based on other dimensions of difference (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). For Indian women in the UAE, I have witnessed that gender intersects with class, rage,

marital status, regional origin, and professional sector. Existing scholarship shows that religious identity shapes experiences in the UAE's Islamic context in important ways which appeared explicitly in my research.

The research on high-skilled migrant women in the Gulf shows persistent inequalities that shape both professional and personal trajectories. Khattab and others (2011) demonstrated through qualitative interviews in Qatar, how women's workplace experiences are mediated by marital and family status, with differential treatment favouring married women while sidelining single women as "temporary." Similarly, Rodriguez and Scurry (2019) highlighted how foreignness and gender together position skilled migrant women in Qatar as outsiders, creating barriers to career progression despite their advanced qualifications. It is evident from their work that even women who appear privileged by virtue of their professional positions face significant discrimination. The kafala system, which is a sponsorship system practiced in gulf region, involves binding migrant workers to a specific employer throughout the period of their residence in a country. This system largely shapes the experiences of migrant women in the gulf. Fernandez (2011) argued that this system enforces gendered divisions of labor by regulating migrants' entry, residence, and employment in ways that disproportionately restrict women's opportunities I will not discuss Kafala system further because this system is not applicable in case of my research participants.

Kapiszewski's (2017, p. 58) work shows that extreme segmentation in the gulf labour market creating rigid hierarchies based on nationality, gender, and occupation. For example, at the top are Western expatriates in finance and consulting receiving high salaries and considerable autonomy. Below them are Arab expatriates in education and healthcare, followed by Asian professionals including Indians in IT, engineering, and nursing—the tier where I understand my research participants are located. While Asian service workers, construction workers, and domestic workers occupy the lowest tiers (Gardner, 2010, p. 51; Ahmad, 2017, p. 112; Frantz, 2008, p. 895). For example, even among professionals, women report lower salaries than male colleagues in identical roles, concentration in support rather than leadership positions, and exclusion from informal networking in male-dominated spaces which is crucial part of my research.

Discussion on gender norms appeared multiple times in participants' responses. Gulf states are characterized by conservative Islamic social norms regulating gender relations, though with significant variation (Bristol-Rhys, 2010, p. 155). Gender segregation takes multiple forms in gulf region including legal frameworks based on Sharia principles, spatial segregation in public spaces, dress codes expecting modest attire, and behavioral norms

restricting unmarried men and women from socializing (Khalaf, 2000, p. 89; Nagy, 2006, p. 113). For migrant women, these norms create complex navigation challenges (Vora, 2013, p. 54). I learned that Western expatriates often receive informal exemptions, while Asian professional women face greater scrutiny and are expected to demonstrate cultural respect through modest dress and behavioural conformity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology employed to examine the gendered experiences of North Indian women migrants in UAE working in the IT sector. The chapter is divided into multiple sections describing the data collection process, challenges, accessibility and adaptability, ethical considerations. Towards the end of the chapter, I have also added a reflection my positionality as a researcher.

3.1 Tools of Data Collection

As proposed in my research design, I have used qualitative interviewing method to collect primary data. I conducted in-depth semi structured interviews with 13 participants currently working in UAE. Out of 13 interviews, 6 interviews were conducted using online medium (Whatsapp and Botim calls) while the rest were conducted in-person enjoying food and beverages in cafés in New Delhi.

I have also used secondary data sources to enrich and complement my primary data. I have secondary data in the form of academic literature, reports published my different UN and other international bodies, newspaper articles, research or reports published by national governments and foreign governments, reports published by local institutes and organizations.

3.2 Data Collection Process: Navigation, Adaptation, and Access

3.2.1 Research Timeline and Geographic Context

The primary data collection occurred between July and August 2025, focusing on North Indian women migrants working in the IT sectors in the UAE. The research was conducted across two major urban centres in North India: New Delhi and Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Initially, I had proposed to do fieldwork in Lucknow. But later adapted to do fieldwork in New Delhi due to challenges faced in participant recruitment.

3.2.2 Sampling Strategy

This research employed snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method particularly appropriate for hard-to-reach populations such as international migrants (Noy, 2008, p. 330). Given the dispersed nature of the target population, snowball sampling enabled access through trusted referrals while protecting respondent confidentiality. I utilised personal network to reach out to respondents in UAE whom I interviewed online. Other research

participants that I interviewed in New Delhi were found at Gulf approved medical centre association (GAMCA) centres. The respondents were visiting these centres because they were undergoing tuberculosis (TB) test and other mandatory health assessments which is required for work visa, or they were accompanying family member to the centre.

3.2.3 Entry Points and Access Strategies

Strategy 1- The GAMCA centres served as the primary initial entry point. GAMCA centres are medical facilities officially authorized by GCC states to conduct mandatory medical assessments for all prospective migrants (GAMCA, n.d.). These centres function as obligatory checkpoints in the migration process, making them strategic sites where migrants congregate regardless of occupation, employer, or destination city within the Gulf. Apart from this, I also contacted and visited recruitment agencies.

Site 1- Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

While doing fieldwork in Lucknow was nothing but disappointing in terms of locating respondents, it was insightful as well in other ways. The rationale behind choosing Lucknow as field was that it is dominated by Muslim population who rapidly migrate to the gulf region. I visited 9 centres in Lucknow in different neighbourhoods like Aliganj, Hazratganj, Lalbagh, Aminabad etc. Firstly, I visited New Lucknow diagnostics centre located in Aliganj and stayed there from 9 am- 5 pm. I had a fruitful conversation with centre manager and visitors. According to the manager, there are 28 GAMCA centres in Lucknow. He informed that on an average 4-5 women visit the centre per month. Most of these women are visiting gulf region as dependents or are being recruited for domestic workers, or workers which are categorized as low skilled jobs. All the centres I visited in Lucknow were dominated by male population. Most people visiting in Lucknow belonged to the eastern belt of Uttar Pradesh and primary seeking jobs in semi-skilled and low-skilled sector like construction worker or driver.

Fig.1 *GAMCA centres in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh* (fieldwork,2025)

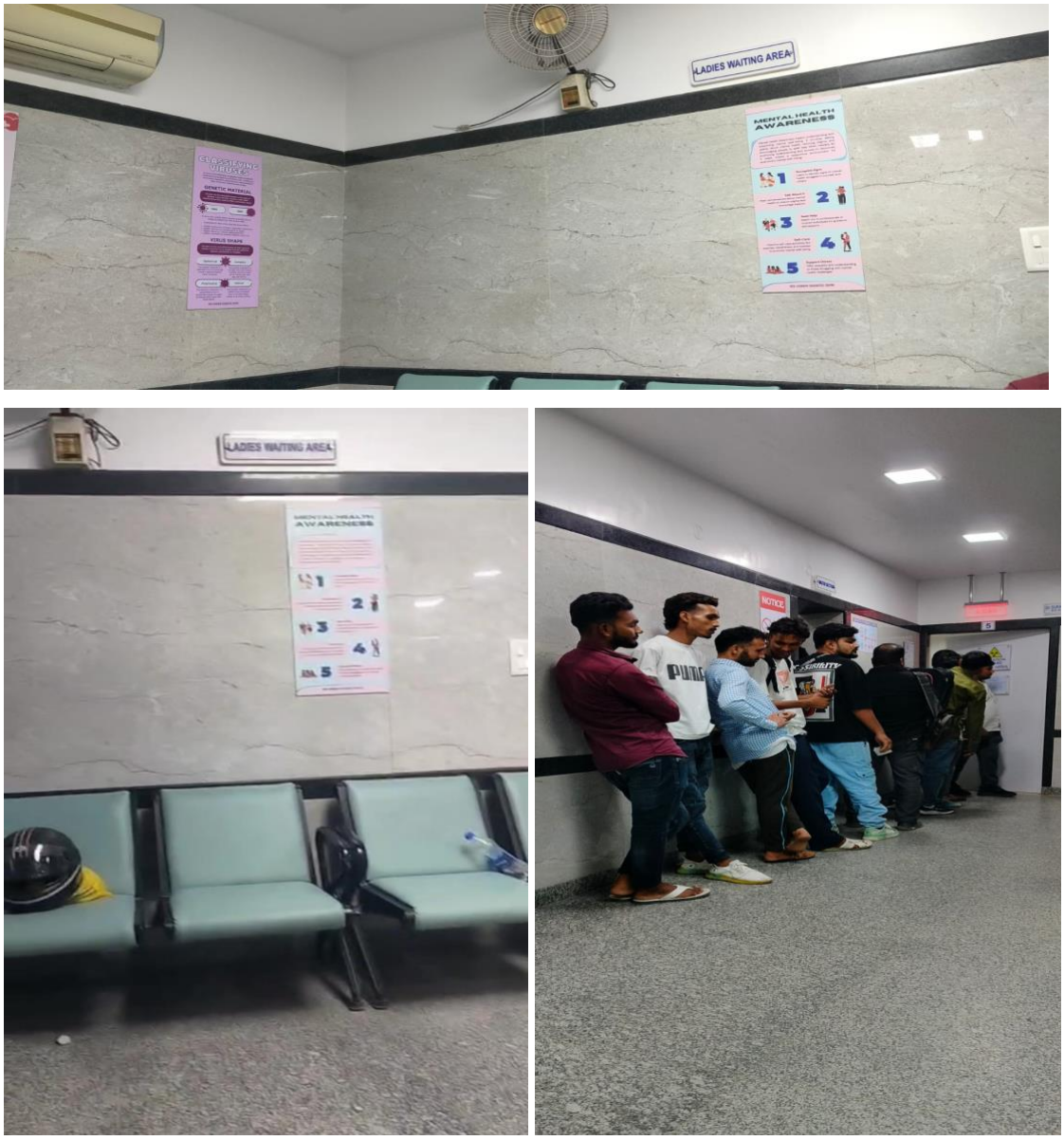

Fig.2 *Empty ladies' section in GAMCA Centre, Aliganj used by men* (fieldwork, 2025)

Site- 2: New Delhi

As informed by the one of the centres in-charge, there are approximately 24 GAMCA-approved centres in Delhi. I visited three centres located namely in Rajendra Nagar, South Extension, Greater Kailash Phase I, and Greater Kailash Phase. The rationale behind choosing New Delhi as site was that it has higher concentration of professional migrants. As opposed to Lucknow, I was able to locate respondents in New Delhi. New Delhi caters to more diverse migration population. It appeared in the conversations with centre in-charge that there were high and semi migrants belonging to different sectors like hospitality, management, cosmetic and makeup etc, educational migrants (students), and as well as semi or unskilled migrants visiting the centres.

Fig.3 *GAMCA centre in Rajendra Place, New Delhi* (fieldwork, 2025)

Strategy 2: Recruitment Agencies

Recognizing the limitations of medical centre recruitment especially in Lucknow, I engaged with recruitment agencies specializing in Gulf placements. These agencies serve as crucial intermediaries in the migration process, matching Indian job seekers with Gulf employers and facilitating visa processing. I reached to several recruitment agencies through justdail.com. It is a digital platform where professional ventures are listed. The conversation with multiple recruitment agents gave me an idea that Delhi was more likely to connect with respondents as it surrounded IT like Gurgaon. Hence, I chose to do fieldwork in New Delhi.

Strategy 3: Personal Network

I reached out to Professor Archana Tewari, who is a Professor at University of Lucknow. She is a scholar of diaspora studies. She guided me during the fieldwork in Lucknow. I was able to reach out to respondents in UAE through friend's referral and family connection. Initial respondents recruited through these channels referred additional contacts, creating expanding network.

3.2.4 Sample Limitations

While 13 interviews provide rich data, the sample remains modest relative to the population's potential diversity. The sample is not balanced in terms religious and caste backgrounds. I couldn't achieve balanced diversity due to snowball method.

3.2.5 Interview Protocol and Process

A semi-structured interview schedule was used for data collection. I took consent informed consent meaning they were able to stop or leave the conversation at any given point of time. I refrained from directly asking sensitive information like caste background of the respondents which can be perceived as discriminatory. I have made sure that the participants are comfortable and provided them space to talk freely. The participants were not pushed to share information they indicated was sensitive, potentially dangerous, or could jeopardize employment.

All interviews were manually written not recorded as the participants were not comfortable. Interviews were conducted in mixed language, switching between English and Hindi. For the interviews conducted online, I sent the interview schedule with my short bio on Whatsapp and schedule a time for interview. The interviews were conducted over Botim video calls as Whatsapp calls are not functional in UAE.

3.3 Challenges

During my fieldwork, I encountered various challenges from identifying research respondents (which I have discussed earlier) to being misidentified as prospective women migrant to UAE and others.

3.3.1 Gatekeeping and Misidentification

One of the practical challenges I encountered during fieldwork was being repeatedly misidentified by administrative people at the GAMCA centres and recruitment agencies.

Manager at the GAMCA centres were reluctant to share information, and even asked me to not to interact with staff and people. They might have assumed my identity as investigative person which led to delayed access and created initial suspicion. To overcome this, I had to clarify my purpose repeatedly, provide my university identification to rectify their doubts about my identity.

In the case of recruitment agencies, many assumed I was a job seeker intending to migrate to the Gulf, rather than a researcher conducting an academic study. Due to these assumptions, I received multiple calls from recruitment agencies bringing job options suitable for my profile.

3.3.2 Accessibility, Adaptability and Other Challenges

Since I have discussed accessibility in terms of finding respondent, I will not delve into this any further. However, adapting to new field came up with different challenge. I had to travel to multiple places which resulted in unplanned expenses.

I struggled with scheduling interviews with respondents I interviewed in UAE. While the time difference between India and UAE is not significant, however, it was tough to find free time as my respondents are working hours. Due to this, most interviews were either scheduled on weekends/ holidays or late in the night.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

3.4.1 Managing Dual Relationships and Reciprocity

One of the ethical dilemmas, I faced were with respondents who were living in UAE at that time. Since, I recruited those participants through personal networks. I had to ensure that participation remained voluntary and be very careful that our personal relationships did not influence the information by the respondents.

I also struggled with questions of reciprocity thinking how to appropriately thank my research participants for their time. Since my research participants were financially empowered, there was no question of reciprocating monetary or materials goods. I chose to pay for the food and beverages to the participants whom I interviewed in person as a token of thank you.

3.4.2 Respecting Boundaries

I ensured that I had informed consent of the respondents prior and during our conversations. Since the participants were not comfortable with audio recordings, I chose to jot down the interviews in a notebook. Some participants were not comfortable with listing the names of the company they work for and sometimes hinted at deeply sensitive experiences but chose not to elaborate. I did not coax them into giving me information rather in those moments, I prioritized their comfort over my academic curiosity.

3.4.3 Anonymity

I have maintained anonymity and findings and analysis (Chapter-4) uses pseudonyms throughout the discussion.

By carefully taking the above measures, I sought to maintain the highest possible standards of confidentiality, respect, and ethical accountability.

3.5 A Note on My Positionality as a Researcher

As a researcher who is capturing the experiences of North Indian women migrants in the Gulf, my identity as North Indian educational migrant women automatically shaped how I entered and navigated the geographical field. Since, I was born and raised in Lucknow though my family roots lie in Deoria, UP and lived in Delhi for five years and eventually moved to Netherlands, I could relate to the interstate mobilities experiences shared by the respondents.

I belong to the Bhumihar caste which is landowning upper-caste community of North India. However, my family has been very progressive and their non-traditional stance towards caste structure keeps challenging privileges associated. My cultural background and familiarity with North Indian social norms created a sense of shared understanding and comfort with the participants. The ability to converse in English, Hindi and understanding of dialects, allowed me to build rapport quickly. I think sharing a same gender orientation as my participants, also helped establish trust; many women felt more at ease discussing sensitive aspects of their lives.

At the same time, I was acutely aware of the power dynamics embedded in my position which I experienced differently with each participant. For Example, as a postgraduate student conducting academic research, I occupied a position of relative privilege compared to many of my participants who were less educated or younger than me.

Moreover, as someone who had not personally experienced labour migration, I recognized my partial “outsider” status. However, my experience working with migrant workers in Kulesara while I was volunteering for a NGO in the past years, and my own experience of labour market in Netherlands (pursuits of finding job as I am close to completing my degree here), made me an “insider” at times.

It was tough to maintain objectivity at times especially when I was interviewing the participant I found through personal connections. This added a different layer to my positionality as a researcher, which I have discussed above in the ethical considerations section.

Chapter4: Findings and Analysis

As mentioned in the chapter 1, the main objective of the research is to study the engendered experiences of the North Indian female I.T workers in UAE using the skill framework. In this chapter I will present the findings gathered from the 13 in-depth interviews collected during my fieldwork.

4.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

The following table presents the demographic profile of the participants which show their age, marital status, education, and religion.

Sr. No.	Pseudonym Used for Participants	Place of interview/ Mode of interview	Place of resident in Host country	Place of Birth	Age	Marital Status	Religion
1	Pooja	New Delhi (Rajendra Place)	Sharjah	Delhi	24	Unmarried	Hinduism
2	Preeti	New Delhi (Rajendra Place)	Abu Dhabi	Noida	28	Unmarried	Hinduism
3	Kavya	New Delhi (Rajendra Place)	Abu Dhabi	Azamgarh	25	Unmarried	Hinduism
4	Varsha	New Delhi (South Extension)	Abu Dhabi	Delhi	24	Unmarried	Hinduism
5	Amina	New Delhi (South Extension)	Dubai	Delhi	34	Married	Islam
6	Ravish	New Delhi (Greater kailash)	Dubai	Lucknow	30	Married	Islam

7	Arushi	New Delhi (Greater Kailash)	Dubai	Delhi	32	Married	Hinduism
8	Sheela	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Gurgaon	26	Married	Hinduism
9	Shalu	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Banaras	25	Unmarried	Hinduism
10	Tripti	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Noida	24	Unmarried	Hinduism
11	Fareeba	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Lucknow	32	Married	Islam
12	Vaishnavi	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Noida	26	Unmarried	Hinduism
13	Ritu	Online (whatsapp/ Botim)	Dubai	Delhi	35	Married	Hinduism

Fig. 4 Table 1. *Demographic profile of the respondents* (fieldwork, 2025)

Age: The age bracket of the respondents was early twenties to late thirties ranging from 24 years old to 38 years old. The average age of the sample is 28 years old.

Marital Status: 7 out of 13 respondents are married which is little more than a half and live with their spouses in the host country. While other unmarried respondents live alone independently either in rented accommodation or in hostels.

Religion: Most of my respondents are Hindus while only 3 respondents are Muslims. There is no balance in terms religious faith of the respondents because I used snowball sampling as a method to reach out to participants.

Caste: As mentioned above, during the interviews, I did not actively ask my respondents about their caste. Historically, caste has been a system of oppression in India. I assumed this could be a sensitive thing to ask. The question of caste did not come explicitly during the interviews. However, I figured out their caste looking at their surnames carefully. This sample was dominated by upper caste respondents. In case of Muslim participants, two participants belonged to Sunni sect while one belonged to Shia.

Moving forward, here presented is the table which provides details on the educational level, Occupation, work experience both in home and host country in years and months.

Serial No	Participants (pseudonym)	Highest Qualifying Degree	Year of migration to UAE	Work experiences in the home country (in years)	Work experience in the host Country (in years)	Occupation
1	Pooja	Bachelors	2024	Less than year	1 year	I.T Support
2	Preeti	Masters	2024	3 years (formerly worked at Airtel India)	1 year	Network Professional in some MNC
3	Kavya	Bachelors	2023	1 year (6 months intership)	1 year, 8 months	Data Analyst
4	Varsha	Bachelors	2023	1 year	2 years	Data Analyst
5	Amina	Bachelors+ MBA	2017	None	7 years	I.T consultant
6	Ravish	Bachelors+ certificate course	2024	4 years	1 year	E-commerce specialist

7	Arushi	Masters	2020	3 years	5 years	Cyber security Manager
8	Sheela	Bachelors	2023	1 year	2 years	Senior analyst for e-commerce company
9	Shalu	Bachelors	2022	1 year	3 years	I.T. Sales representative at Family Fruit Tree, (formerly employed at recruitment/visa company in UAE)
10	Tripti	Bachelors	2025	1year professional experience (6 months internship)	Less than 1 year	I.T. Support at NMC Royal hospital
11	Fareeba	Bachelors	2018	1 year	6 years	Cyber security head
12	Vaishnavi	Masters	2024	2 years	1 year	Senior Tech support
13	Ritu	Masters	2015	None	7 years	I.T manager in retail company

Fig.5 Table 2. *Demographic profile of the respondents* (fieldwork, 2025)

Educational Level: Most of the respondents have attained bachelors' level of education. Only 4 out 13 respondents have master's degree. However, we can see that some respondents have complemented their degree with MBA or certificate courses.

Year of Migration: The year of migration in this dataset range starting from 2015 (almost a decade now) to recent 2025. Only 4 out 13 participants have longer experience of living and working in UAE (5-7 years) while the other migrated in the past 4 years.

Work Experience in Home Country: The work experience of the respondents in the home country ranges from none to 4 years. Most of the participants have worked for 1-2 years in India. The average work experience of the dataset is around 1.5 years.

Work Experience in Host Country: The work experience of the respondents in the host country ranges from less than 1 year to 7 years maximum. Most of the participants have worked for 1-2 years in India. However, the average work experience of the data sample is 2 and half years which is longer compared to the work experience in the home country.

Occupation: From the table, we can see that participants are involved in different jobs namely data analyst, cyber security head etc. However, the hierarchies of the IT sector jobs is very much evident in the data.

First and foremost, the participants of research show profound contradictions that run through their stories. These contradictions appeared very often; experiences of skill recognition tell strikingly different stories, sometimes even within the same person's narrative. These contradictions are not inconsistencies to be resolved but rather windows into the complex reality of how skill is socially constructed across borders, how gender mediates professional recognition, and how family configurations shape women's migration experiences in fundamentally different ways. As I delved deeper into their narratives, guided by the theoretical frameworks of Steinberg (1990), Bourdieusien framework adapted by Siegmann (2010), and Liu-Farrer et al. (2021), I began to see these apparent contradictions not as problems in the data but as the data itself—revealing how women's professional competencies are simultaneously celebrated and devalued, how migration offers both escape and entrapment, how skill recognition operates through complex power relations that women must strategically navigate.

Firstly, I examine how skill is constructed, recognized, and valued differently in home (India) versus host (UAE) contexts. Secondly, I analyse the mechanisms through which women's skills are simultaneously valued and devalued in UAE professional spaces, showing how gender stereotypes, nationality hierarchies, and client preferences operate to systematically undervalue women's competencies. Thirdly, I explore how living experiences in the foreign land—whether women live with families in UAE or alone, fundamentally shape their experiences of autonomy, bargaining power, and professional advancement.

Throughout this analysis, I've tried to stay close to the respondent' own words, to honour the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of their experiences.

4.2 Construction of Skill in the Home Country

4.2.1 Education, Skill Attainment and Mobility within the Host Country

"I have completed my bachelor's degree while I was in Banaras. Then I moved to Noida, was briefly working for a company. Later, I took admission in MBA program, so I can negotiate a better paying job" **(Shalu, fieldwork, 2025)**

Levine writes that "Education helps people not only gain knowledge but also build important life skills such as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving" (para 4). (refavailable). It is evident from the presented data table above that all the respondents have attained Bachelor's or Master's level degree. However, it is important to note that most of them have complemented their degrees with MBA or certificate courses related to their field of specialization. Similarly to Shalu, another respondent Ritu holds certificate course in interior designing which helped building her career. Education is one of prominent causes of migration within the India. According to Padhan Sarbeswar (2023), internal student migration in India has become fast paced (pg. 128). The research participants have lived in different cities like Banglore, Noida, Delhi for receiving education. Apart from education, the participants have lived in different cities for work and career growth mostly in Banglore and Gurgaon which are considered as IT hubs in India. The migration journeys of most respondents can be described two-tier system of migration. For example, Shalu's journey started from Banaras to Noida and then to Dubai. Similarly, Amina is second generation migrant to Delhi who now lives in Dubai. She mentioned that her grandfather settled in Delhi but her ancestral roots are in Kerala. From the discussion above, it can be asserted that the Mobility has played a vital role in skill attainment either though education or jobs.

4.2.2 Migration motivation and Pathways

This section will analyse the response received from the interviews. The section is dedicated to understand the motivation, job seeking, challenges faced in the migration process and how do women migrants perceive the differences in opportunities between men and women during the migration process. When asked about the motivation behind the migration decision, one of the most common responses was better opportunities. A pattern emerged across all the interviews that respondents consistently framed migration to UAE as offering "better

financial opportunities", “higher renumeration” “better salary and lifestyle” compared to India.

One of the respondents, Tripti (fieldwork,2025) stated that, “The primary motivation for migration was the pursuit of career growth, higher remuneration compared to India, and the opportunity to gain international exposure" there are better career opportunities and exposure to international markets,". She also simultaneously noted that "work pressure is higher, and there's less flexibility." I understood this not as mere trade-off but as transformation of the terms on which her skills are recognized and rewarded.

While discussing the job seeking, the respondents’ narratives illustrate how the notion of *skill* is socially constructed through recruitment processes, institutional validation, and digital mediation. Their experiences highlight that *being skilled* is not only about personal capability but also about how institutions and systems recognize and legitimize certain forms of knowledge and experience. The respondents said that *“applied directly through online job portals and was selected after a few interview rounds,”* (Ritu, fieldwork, 2025) while another said that *“Employment was secured through a formal recruitment process, which included licensing and credential verification, facilitated by established recruitment pathways.”* (Tripti, fieldwork, 2025). Their accounts reflect how digital literacy and communication ability have become recognized as employable “skills.” The recruitment process which is mediated through online portals which privileges candidates who can navigate digital systems. This frames technological proficiency as a *marker of skill*. In the years times, self-presentation, adaptability, and digital engagement are considered socially valorised forms of competence.
Additionally, This highlights the ambiguous space between formal and informal recruitment. The dependency and reliance of the respondents on agencies reveals how “skill” is often mediated by institutional gatekeepers. These agencies sometimes solely determine which forms of labour are ‘*worthy of recognition’*. Workers’ capabilities are filtered through the legitimacy of the recruitment process rather than the intrinsic quality of their work. Thus, “being skilled” becomes a relational category dependent on how institutions classify labour. It is reflected in interviews that what we call “skill” is not just about what people can do, but rather about how institutions and society define and recognize certain kinds of work.

The participants highlighted that one of the major challenges during migration and employment transitions involved documentation, licensing examinations, and recognition of

qualifications. As one participant noted, *"Recognition of qualifications required additional formalities, which delayed the transition"* (kavya, fieldwork, 2025) This reflects how skill validation is not only technical but also bureaucratic, shaped by institutional definitions of what counts as "qualified." Such processes also show that "skill" is not universally recognized; it is constructed through legal and administrative systems that privilege certain geographies and credentials over others (Sharma, 2020).

One participant shared that the, *"The visa and documentation process was a bit confusing at first, but I managed with guidance from my company. The main challenge was adjusting to the new work culture."* (Amina, fieldwork, 2025). This points to the emotional and adaptive aspects of migration that are often invisible in formal discussions of skill. While technical competence and credentials are emphasized, the emotional resilience, adaptability, and cross-cultural learning migrants display are rarely acknowledged as forms of skill even though they are essential to integration and success (Parreñas, 2012).

The interviews also revealed clear gendered perceptions in migration and employment opportunities. One respondent observed, *"Men often get preference in some roles, especially fieldwork or logistics. Women get good opportunities too, but sometimes employers question their ability to manage certain tasks or timings."* (Shalu, fieldwork, 2025)

Thus, while migration systems claim to be merit-based, they often reproduce existing gender hierarchies by valuing some forms of labour and skill over the others. Sharma (2020) has rightfully argued, these processes reveal that skill is not an objective quality but a social label which intersects with gender, class, and nationality.

4.3 Skill Recognition and Professional Credibility

When women migrate from India to the Gulf countries for professional work, they carry with them formal credentials, years of accumulated experience, and technical capabilities they've worked hard to develop. However, something interesting and often frustrating happens when these skills cross national borders—they get revalued, sometimes questioned, and occasionally dismissed in ways that have little to do with actual competence. This transformation reveals an uncomfortable truth: professional skills aren't valued objectively based on what you can actually do. Instead, they're valued or devalued through social processes that reflect deeper power relations around gender, nationality, and race.

I analysed the experiences of thirteen Indian women IT professionals working in the UAE, and distinct patterns emerged that highlight how professional competencies get recognized, questioned, and transformed across different geographical contexts. What became clear is that while migration changes certain conditions, it doesn't eliminate gendered skill devaluation. The specific mechanisms might shift, but systematic barriers continue to persist in different forms.

The experiences of namely Tripti, Shalu, and Ritu reveal stark variations in how professional skills are recognized and how gender operates within UAE workplaces. These variations represent what researchers call stratified systems that characterize Gulf migration—systems that operate along multiple axes including gender, nationality, and professional sector, creating very different experiences even among women from similar backgrounds.

4.3.1 The Hidden Hierarchies

"Skills and qualifications are largely recognized, though there remains an implicit hierarchy favouring Western-trained professionals over South Asian migrants." (Tripti, 2025)

The question of skill recognition reveals intersecting hierarchies that go way beyond gender alone. When I spoke with Tripti, she explained that western trained professional are favoured by employers over South Asian migrants. This observation speaks volumes about the gulf workplaces. The migrant workers contribute enormously to economic value, however, they face systematic devaluation of their credentials based simply on where they're come from. This creates what researchers call *"intersectional disadvantage for women migrants"* meaning that gender and nationality compound together to produce distinct forms of workplace marginalization that are greater than the sum of their parts.

During the interview, Shalu stated that *"sometimes my experience is undervalued compared to male colleagues with similar backgrounds."* Her experience provides concrete evidence of this gendered dimension in action. Despite having similar or equivalent qualifications, as the male colleague in the workplace, similar years of experience, comparable technical skills—yet gender operates as a mechanism for differential valuation. Despite all the talk about meritocracy in professional environments, it can be said that these evaluation criteria are never truly neutral. They're filtered through gendered assumptions about competence, authority, and leadership potential.

4.3.2 The Credibility Gap

The dynamics of authority and credibility present particularly revealing insights into how gender shapes professional interactions in the UAE context. Shalu articulates her experience that many professional women might recognize as true, she stated *"Occasionally, I need to work harder to earn trust from clients. Some customers prefer to speak with male staff, which can be discouraging."* This type of credibility deficit doesn't just come from within the organization. It is perpetuated through client preferences too, demonstrating how gendered assumptions about authority circulate beyond formal workplace hierarchies. The emotional toll that Shalu identifies as *"discouraging"* represents something deeper: the constant work of managing feelings and maintaining professional composure that women disproportionately perform in professional contexts. It's exhausting to '*prove themselves more'* (shalu, 2025) to achieve same level of worth and trust that male colleagues receive automatically without making extra attempts for it.

4.3.3 Leadership: The Ultimate Glass Ceiling

Access to leadership positions emerges as the dimension where gender operates most visibly as a constraint. One of the respondents, Tripti notes that *"being a woman can influence visibility and authority, as leadership positions are not equally accessible,"* while Shalu observes that *"at times women need to prove themselves more. Leadership roles are still mostly held by men."* That phrase *"prove themselves more"* encapsulates a fundamental challenge. Women must exceed standards to be judged as meeting them, while men meet standards simply by reaching them. This creates an additional burden of demonstration that constitutes a real form of inequality. For these women expats, Every project becomes a test, every interaction a potential evaluation, every mistake evidence of broader incompetence rather than normal human error.

Contrary to the experiences of many respondents, Ritu's experiences provide an important counterpoint that we shouldn't ignore. She said during the interview her skills and qualifications are *"cherished"* and states directly that '*being a woman does not affect her visibility, authority, or leadership opportunities'.* This variation is significant because it tells us that gender equality isn't uniformly distributed across all sectors and organizations. What can be make things better for Ritu is that she has lived in UAE for over a decade now (see demographic table). However, gender inequality depends heavily on specific institutional cultures, leadership commitments, and sectoral norms. Some organizations have genuinely created more equitable environments, and that matters.

4.4 Comparing UAE and India: What Changes and What Doesn't

The comparative dimension between working in the UAE versus India reveals a complex set of trade-offs that have particular implications for women's professional lives. It's not a simple story of "better" or "worse" rather it's more nuanced.

"compared to India, the GCC offers higher pay, better facilities, and a more diverse workplace. However, professional hierarchies are stricter, and career advancement is less transparent." (Tripti, fieldwork, 2025)

This lack of transparency in advancement mechanisms is particularly problematic for women. Research suggests that women benefit more from formalized, explicit promotion criteria than from informal networking that often characterizes male-dominated advancement pathways. When the rules are clear and applied consistently, gender bias has less room to operate. When advancement depends on who you know and informal recommendations, women tend to get left behind.

Shalu offers a similar assessment that *"there are better career opportunities and exposure to international markets, but work pressure is higher, and there's less flexibility."* The financial benefits are real and substantial, the respondents told me that with could save significantly more in the UAE than they ever could in India since they get paid better salaries and have better opportunities. However., the women respondents sometimes feel burdened as well.

As Tripti acknowledges, *"work-life balance pressures are also more pronounced for women,"* pointing to what sociologists call the "double shift" that employed women navigate full-time paid work plus disproportionate responsibility for household management and care work. Even when women aren't living with their families, they often carry the mental and emotional labour of managing family relationships from a distance, coordinating care for aging parents, and maintaining cultural and religious practices.

The temporal dimensions of work also reveal gendered implications. Shalu describes *"balancing workload and long hours"* as stressful, reflecting broader patterns in contemporary neoliberal work cultures that demand intensive time commitments often incompatible with caregiving responsibilities. The "ideal worker" in these contexts is someone unencumbered by family obligations—someone who can work late, travel on short notice, and prioritize work above all else. This ideal worker has historically been male.

These findings gathered from the interviews collectively demonstrate that gender operates not as a single, uniform constraint but through multiple, context-specific mechanisms. Professional recognition gets filtered through intersecting hierarchies of nationality and gender. Authority must be constantly performed and proved by women in ways not required of male colleagues. Leadership access remains structurally constrained in most sectors. And the temporal organization of work fails to accommodate care responsibilities that women disproportionately bear, whether they're caring for children, aging parents, or simply maintaining the social and emotional connections that keep families functioning.

4.5 Workplace Culture and Gender Dynamics

The workplace experiences of respondents reveal complex and often contradictory terrain when it comes to gender relations in GCC professional settings. These are places where formal equality policies coexist with persistent hierarchies, where respectful treatment operates alongside subtle forms of bias, and where women's experiences vary dramatically depending on their specific organizational context.

4.5.1 Different Realities, Different Workplaces

In the interview, Fareeba's characterization of gender relations in her workplace as *"BALANCED"* suggests either a genuinely equitable environment she works in or perhaps a situation where discrimination operates so smoothly and naturally that it becomes invisible. She reports no negative impact from GCC cultural norms on her professional life and perceives that Indian women professionals are generally viewed positively. For her, the workplace feels fair and the playing field feels level.

Contrary to her experience, other participants tell quite different stories. Sheela describes relations as *"professional and respectful, though men still dominate in management roles."* Similarly, Pooja characterizes them as *"professional but hierarchical, with male supervisors often occupying decision-making positions."* It is important to notice the pattern here. The professionalism and respect exist at the interpersonal level, but systematic male dominance at the structural level is present.

The concentration of men in management positions creates "skewed groups" situations where women become hyper-visible precisely because there are less in numbers compared to men, yet they lack the critical mass necessary to challenge dominant organizational cultures.

4.5.2 Cultural Adaptation: Whose Responsibility?

"modest dressing and careful interaction with male colleagues are expected. I adapt to maintain professionalism." (Sheela)

The influence of GCC cultural norms presents another dimension for migrant women where their experiences diverge significantly. Sheela and Pooja have described substantial effects on their professional conduct. As quoted above, Pooja similarly observes that *"cultural expectations around modesty and formal interactions with male colleagues shape daily professional life. Dress codes and etiquette are strictly observed."*

Gendered nature of these requirements is very evident here. It becomes women's responsibility who must modulate their dress, regulate their behavior, and carefully manage their interaction patterns. In contrast to women, Men face far fewer restrictions on how they present themselves professionally. This represents what feminist scholars call "disciplinary practices" that construct femininity through bodily regulation and behavioral constraint (Bartky, 1990). These adaptations aren't optional extras—they become part of the everyday professional experience for many women working in the Gulf. Not following them can have real professional consequences.

4.5.3 The Subtlety of Bias

In this section , the question of discrimination and bias reveals an important distinction between overt and subtle forms of inequality. While the women I interviewed didn't report direct discrimination and no one directly told them explicitly they couldn't have a promotion because they're women. Several participants discussed more subtle forms of bias that are harder to pin down but equally consequential.

For Example, Shalu explains: *"sometimes subtle bias exists like assuming women can't handle certain clients or outdoor sales."* Similarly, Pooja notes that *"while overt discrimination is rare, subtle forms of bias exist, particularly in relation to promotions and recognition."*

The focus on promotions and recognition as sites of bias is particularly significant. These moments—when merit must be evaluated and opportunities allocated—are precisely the points where subtle bias operates most consequentially. Because promotion decisions typically involve subjective judgment and ambiguous criteria, they provide space for gendered assumptions to influence outcomes while maintaining the appearance of meritocracy.

In the case where and When evaluation criteria are vague—"leadership potential," "cultural fit," "executive presence"—bias has room to operate. Managers might genuinely believe they're making objective assessments while unconsciously favoring candidates who might look, sound, and act like existing leaders, which typically means men. This is why Pooja's observation about bias *"particularly in relation to promotions"* identifies a mechanism through which gender hierarchy reproduces itself across organizational levels, even in the absence of explicitly discriminatory policies.

4.5.4 The Double-Edged Sword of Positive Stereotypes

The perception of Indian women professionals adds another layer of complexity, revealing how nationality intersects with gender to shape workplace positioning. The respondents indicated positive perceptions generally while Fareeba calls it simply *"Positive,"* Sheela notes that colleagues *"generally respect Indian women for being hardworking, disciplined, and reliable,"*. Adding to this observation, Pooja observes that *"Indian women generally perceived as hardworking, competent, and dedicated."*

On the surface, these seem like good stereotypes to have. However, Pooja's crucial addition reveals the trap where she stated that *"At the same time, stereotypes of submissiveness and compliance persist."* This coexistence of positive valuation and limiting stereotypes reflects what researchers termed "ambivalent sexism"—apparently favourable views of women that actually coexist with and ultimately reinforce gender hierarchy (Fiske et al., 2002).

The north Indian expats in UAE are seen as hardworking, reliable, and compliant. They are being valued but you're valued as an excellent subordinate rather than as a potential leader. The stereotype of submissiveness, while potentially making Indian women workers desirable employees from an employer's perspective, simultaneously constrains their access to leadership and authority. Research on stereotype content by Cuddy and others shows that groups perceived as warm but not competent face what's called "paternalistic prejudice"—they're liked without being respected or given access to power (Cuddy et al., 2004).

4.5.5 Strategic Navigation

The intersectionality of gender and nationality operates through what researchers' term "bounded agency". Migrant women workers exercise autonomy and strategic action, however, always within structurally constrained contexts (Lan, 2003). Sheela's and Pooja's adaptations to GCC cultural norms for example modifying dress, regulating interactions,

represent active negotiation rather than passive acceptance. These women aren't victims simply accepting whatever conditions they face. It can be seen as them making strategic choices about what to adapt to and what to resist.

One of the key points to be keep in mind is that these negotiations occur within power structures they didn't create and can't fully contest without risking their employment. For women migrants, this structural vulnerability intensifies compliance with gendered expectations. For North Indian women migrant challenging the discrimination or refusing to adapt carries much higher stakes than it does for citizens or Western expatriates with greater mobility and legal protections. When your visa status depends on your employer's sponsorship, speaking up against unfair treatment becomes a calculation involving not just your job but your entire legal right to remain in the country. It warrants unnecessary risk.

The different experiences among respondents underscore that workplaces in the GCC aren't uniformly gendered but represent diverse institutional contexts. Fareeba's experience of balanced gender relations differs markedly from Sheela's and Pooja's descriptions of hierarchical structures and pervasive gender norms. The organizations is characterized by what researchers call "multiple masculinities and femininities" that produce different experiences depending on where you're located within organizational hierarchies and networks (Martin, 2003).

4.6 Life Beyond Work: Building Community in Foreign Spaces

For professional Indian women working in the Gulf, life extends far beyond their careers. Their daily experiences involve navigating safety concerns, finding suitable accommodation, staying connected with family back home, building community, and finding their place in a society that will always consider them temporary guests rather than permanent residents.

4.6.1 Safety and Independence

When asked about her living situation, Amina's response is overwhelmingly positive. She describes it as *"super safe"* and says balancing work and family is *"perfect, no problem."* Her enthusiastic language suggests genuine contentment. Other respondents too suggested that safety is one of the reasons they wanted to migrate to UAE. There is stark difference how respondents experienced safety in UAE and Indian. The Gulf states, particularly the UAE, maintain low crime rates and extensive security measures that allow women to move around freely without the constant safety concerns that shape women's mobility in many Indian

cities. For Amina, this sense of independence and security represents a significant improvement.

However, Arushi and Varsha offer more nuanced perspectives that reveal both benefits and limitations. Arushi mentions that *"accommodation is often self-sought and typically involves shared housing,"* while Varsha explains *"I live in shared accommodation with other female staff."*. The prevalence of shared housing among professional women reflects Dubai's expensive rental market that even skilled workers need to share costs. However, it also help them meet new people and experience diversity and they also create living arrangements where women support each other practically and emotionally, building informal support networks through daily proximity.

Varsha's emphasis on living with *"other female staff"* highlights the importance of gender-segregated living arrangements, which reflect both cultural preferences and practical considerations. Similarly, Arushi uses similarly measured language: *"safety is not a major concern in Dubai, and independence is reasonably maintained."* In this case, her usage of phrse like "not a major concern" and "reasonably maintained" acknowledge satisfaction without unqualified enthusiasm. Living in the UAE, offers physical safety from crime and harassment, other forms of constraint exist as discussed by the respondents.

4.6.2 Transnational family ties

One of the major concerns that emerge during the conversations was that how lonely it can be sometimes living in UAE alone. Approximately half of the respondents lived alone in the UAE for work. Perhaps it the most consistent challenge across all the women's experiences involves staying connected with family back in India. Arushi articulates this clearly and states that *"Separation from family in India presents emotional challenges. Digital communication mitigates this, but physical absence creates a sense of disconnection."* This captures a central paradox of modern transnational life perfectly.

The *"sense of disconnection"* Arushi identifies persists beneath all the surface connectivity. Since there is not much difference in the two time zones, its easier to maintain closeness through digital medium however, technology cannot give them real human experience, This is what Varsha expressed stating that *"Since my family is in India, I stay connected through video calls. Sometimes it's emotionally tough, but I manage."* That phrase *"I manage"* is particularly revealing. It suggests active effort to maintain emotional stability despite ongoing difficulty.

Amina's contrasting assessment—*"perfect, no problem"*—stands out as notably different. This also marks the difference between people who are married and unmarried and how their experiences are different. The respondents living with spouse might not experience as much disconnected. People manage transnational family relationships very differently, with factors like family structure, relationship quality before migration, and personal resilience all shaping individual experiences.

However, Arushi's qualification that *"structured platforms for professional women are limited"* points to a significant gap. What's missing are institutional platforms that might better address women-specific professional challenges—career advancement strategies, dealing with workplace discrimination, negotiating salary and benefits, balancing work and life responsibilities. Individual women and informal networks do what they can, but there's only so much peer support can accomplish without institutional backing.

Talking about informal support system, Varsha stated *"Not officially, but I have a circle of Indian friends who provide support."* This distinction between official and unofficial networks is significant. While formal institutional support may be absent, peer networks fill this void functionally. These circles of friends represent relationships that may not be deeply intimate—you might not share your deepest secrets—but they provide crucial practical and emotional support in navigating daily life.

The fact that these circles consist of *"Indian friends"* reflects how support networks naturally form along lines of shared language, culture, and migration experience. The respondnets navigating a foreign context, there's immense comfort in spending time with people who share your cultural reference points, understand the challenges you face without lengthy explanation, and can switch into Hindi or Tamil or whatever your mother tongue is when you're tired of communicating in English.

.Arushi articulates this clearly: *"Social life largely revolves around expatriate and workplace circles. Broader integration into Emirati society is minimal."* This observation captures a defining characteristic of Gulf cities—they contain extreme ethnic and national diversity, yet this diversity operates through segregation rather than integration. The fact that *"social life largely revolves around expatriate and workplace circles"* shows people naturally gravitating toward similar others within structurally constrained contexts. The Indian expatriate communities provide cultural familiarity, shared experience, and mutual understanding that ease migration stresses. This is reflected Varsha’s response as well when she stated

"*Somewhat—daily life is smooth, but cultural differences make it harder to socialize beyond work."* Her qualification *"somewhat"* perfectly captures the partial nature of inclusion in the host society. Functional integration operates smoothly in the sense that place is very much liveable. However, deeper social integration remains elusive. It's hard to make friends outside your immediate expatriate and work circles as reported my many respondents.

Identifying *"cultural differences"* as the barrier locates the challenge in values, practices, and communication patterns rather than explicit exclusion. And that's partly true—genuine cultural differences do make cross-cultural friendship more challenging. But this framing may also obscure structural factors maintaining separation: spatial organization that segregates populations by nationality and class, legal frameworks creating hierarchies of rights and privileges, and economic systems positioning migrants as temporary labour rather than potential citizens or community members.

4.7 Identity, Empowerment, and the Psychological Costs of Migration

The experiences of Fareeba, Tripti, and Shalu reveal this transformation in all its complexity, showing how professional migration simultaneously empowers and challenges women at a deeply personal level.

When asked how migration affected her identity, Fareeba directly without thinking much said that *"I'm confident and independent."*. In my understanding this simple statement captures something profound. In her case, financial independence builds her confidence, while growing confidence enables claim more independence. It's a positive cycle that many migrant women experience. Similarly, Shalu expands on this and said *"It has made me more confident, independent, and adaptable to different cultures."* Her addition of "adaptable" hints at the importance of how flexibly once can navigate different cultural contexts.

One of the respondents, Tripti expressed that*" Migration has reinforced my identity as an independent North Indian woman navigating a global professional environment."* Her emphasis on "navigating" can be understood as she's not passively experiencing migration but actively managing a complex transnational career.

The question of empowerment reveals multiple sources of power and agency in this case. Irst and foremost, most of the respondents emphasized how their safety and security from the crime against women have added their sense of freedom living in UAE. In case of Fareeba, she explicitly connects her empowerment to *"safety, security and independence,"*. Moving

around the cities without constant fear of harassment, also contributes in having mental energy to focus on work and goals rather than constantly managing threats.

Economic empowerment is also one of the major things in women experiences. “Better financial opportunity” as discussed in the migration motivation sections does translate positively. Shalu articulates this and stated *"Yes, earning my own income and managing clients has boosted my confidence and decision-making power."* The link between earning income and decision-making power is crucial. Being financially empowered also translates into decision making in and outside the workplace especially in the family setting. This is also connected to freedom from other forms of patriarchal control that women experience in their families. Tripti recognizes multiple dimensions and said *"Empowerment is derived from financial independence, the ability to contribute to family support back home, and gaining international clinical experience."* She identifies three distinct sources, firstly, personal autonomy through financial control, secondly, transformed family status by becoming a provider rather than dependent, and thirdly, professional capital that opens future opportunities.

But this empowerment comes with psychological costs that are often unspoken. Tripti identifies the toll clearly. She said during the interview that *"Work-related stress, cultural adjustment, and the emotional strain of being away from family affect overall well-being."* Similarly, Shalu expresses this tension as well and said *"Sometimes I feel homesick and stressed due to workload, but I try to stay positive and focus on my goals."*.

The navigation of multiple identities adds another layer of complexity. Shalu explains her strategy: *"I balance them by being professional at work, respectful of local culture, and staying proud of my Indian identity."* The verb "balance" is key—these different identity dimensions sometimes pull in different directions, requiring constant small adjustments depending on context.

Tripti articulates the most sophisticated understanding. *"Daily life involves balancing multiple intersecting identities — as a woman, an Indian, a migrant, and a professional — each of which is differently valued in the GCC context."* (fieldwork, 2025). Her observation that these identities are "differently valued" captures a fundamental reality, being professional carries positive value, but being Indian and being a migrant can carry less prestige than Western nationality or citizen status in different contexts.

However, the psychological costs of migration emerge clearly when respondents discuss mental health and well-being, revealing that empowerment and suffering aren't opposites but often coexist. Fareeba acknowledges challenges "*at initial stage yes slight isolation*," using minimizing language that frames the difficulty as minor and temporary. This pattern of acknowledging hardship while immediately qualifying it suggests both genuine resolution of early struggles and possible discomfort with dwelling on vulnerability. The identification of "isolation" specifically points to social disconnection as a primary psychological challenge in early migration phases, when familiar support networks have been left behind and new ones not yet established. Delving deeper into this, one of the respondents articulated and said *"Work-related stress, cultural adjustment, and the emotional strain of being away from family affect overall well-being."* (Kavya, fieldwork, 2025). This itemization identifies three distinct sources of ongoing psychological difficulty that woman migrants face. Work-related stress reflects the demanding nature of IT employment in the Gulf characterized by long hours, high responsibility, pressure to constantly prove your competence. These create conditions for burnout that aren't easily resolved. Cultural adjustment adds another layer to this experience. Since, it involves the psychological impact of constantly learning new cultural codes, managing unfamiliar social situations, and negotiating between origin and destination cultural frameworks. During the discussion with respondents, it was reflected that even years into migration, cultural navigation requires effort and attention that can be exhausting. The "emotional strain of being away from family" again highlights transnational separation as a persistent psychological burden. This isn't something that simply resolves over time or gets easier with adjustment. Shalu expresses similar struggles and said *"Sometimes I feel homesick and stressed due to workload, but I try to stay positive and focus on my goals."* The pairing of "homesick and stressed" links affective and professional challenges, suggesting they compound each other. The work pressure in office becomes harder to manage without proximate family support. Homesickness intensifies when you're exhausted and stressed and just want your mom's cooking and your sister's company. Her coping strategy *"stay positive and focus on my goals*" in my understanding helps her manage current distress but may also suppress full acknowledgment of emotional needs. This idea to "stay positive" can sometimes become a trap where you don't allow yourself to fully feel or address problems because you're supposed to be strong and focused and grateful for opportunities.

4.8 Navigating Multiple Identities

This section discusses the how these women navigate their identities and how these identities exist together comfortably. One of the respondents Ritu describe GCC society as *"inclusive*". This contrasts with the opinion and experiences of respondents who have faced biases or asked to dress modest among many other things. Some scholars have emphasis on exclusions and hierarchies in Gulf contexts. This suggesting either that her particular position shields her from these dynamics or that she understands "inclusion" differently, perhaps as absence of overt discrimination rather than as full social integration. On the other hand, Shalu provides more detail about identity management. She said that “I balance them by being professional at work, respectful of local culture, and staying proud of my Indian identity." Her experience and opinions suggest how strategic her self-presentation is across different social domains. Being "professional at work" involves performing competence according to workplace norms for example speaking the right language, wearing appropriate clothing, demonstrating technical skill and reliability. Being "respectful of local culture" requires recognizing and conforming to Gulf cultural expectations, modest dress, careful interaction with men, awareness of religious and social sensitivities. This represents emotional and cognitive labour, the constant work of managing self-presentation and monitoring your behaviour. "Staying proud of my Indian identity" suggests active maintenance of cultural connection despite pressures toward assimilation or the devaluation of South Asian identity within Gulf hierarchies.

Here, the "balance" implies this different identity dimensions sometimes pull in different directions, requiring careful negotiation rather than automatic harmony. The respondent is constantly making small adjustments in terms of making more Indian with friends, actively relevant at work, spending more energy into being professional with clients. In addition to this Tripti offers the most complex perspective. She shared that "Daily life involves balancing multiple intersecting identities — as a woman, an Indian, a migrant, and a professional each of which is differently valued in this geographical context." Her use of "intersecting" invokes the analytical framework where identity categories don't simply add together but interact to produce distinct experiences. A woman's experience differs from a man, experience of as an Indian differs from an expat coming from western countries, her identity as migrant differs from a citizen that has several implications. A professional differs from a manual worker. But an Indian woman migrant professional occupies a specific social location produced by the interaction of all these categories simultaneously, experiencing advantages and disadvantages that cannot be understand by looking at each identity dimension from

separately. Tripti's experience that these identities are "differently valued" points to the unequal worth assigned to different social positions. In UAE contexts, being a professional carries positive value for her. However, being Indian and being a migrant carry less prestige than Western nationality and citizen status. Being a woman in IT may be valued in some respects but devalued in others. The religious identity also matter sin this case. For example, being Muslim can relatively advantageous because they have dominant religious community in the gulf region. Therefore, it can be concluded that daily life of the migrant women requires constant navigation of these varying valuations, adjusting self-presentation and expectations depending on which identity dimension is most salient in particular situations.

4.9 Rights, Policies, and Future Aspirations

In this last section, I will discuss the responses regarding legal awareness, policy recommendations, and future plans which reveal significant variation in how skilled Indian women professionals understand their structural positioning in the UAE and envision their trajectories forward.

While talking about the legal rights, participants demonstrated that they know about *"working hours, contracts, and leaves"* while acknowledging gaps where *"more awareness would help."* This partial knowledge leaves workers vulnerable to potential exploitation.

In did ask question regarding kafala system's gendered effects but the responses range from *"No Idea"* to nuanced analysis recognizing that women *"may face fewer physical restrictions, but still depend on employers for visa and mobility permissions."* However, kafala sponsorship system did not apply to them, and hence there were no further discussions on this.

When asked about improving women's experiences, the participants suggested had various suggestions *"Equal pay, mentorship programs, and better career development opportunities for women."* These address wage discrimination, networking disadvantages, and structural barriers to advancement, demonstrating critical awareness of how gender inequality operates at multiple organizational levels.

The future aspirations of the respondents reveal diverse trajectories. Some envision continued international mobility, working in the UAE for experience then potentially *"move to another country or start my own business"* which show that Gulf employment as a strategic career

choice. One respondent expressed an unconventional desire to *"moving to somewhere rural or close to nature"*.

The last thing I asked them was advice if they want to offer to the women who has migration aspirations, the responses reflect different experiences. One respondent said *"Be confident, do your research before moving, understand your rights, and stay focused on your growth"* provides comprehensive, practical guidance emphasizing preparation and self-advocacy while *"Go for it but be cautious and vigilant"* balances encouragement with warning, acknowledging both opportunities and risks. Together, these recommendations suggest that migration as opportunity requiring strategic management rather than guaranteed empowerment.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research has examined the experiences of the North Indian female IT professional migrants in the UAE. Drawing on primary interview data with extensive secondary literature on feminist migration studies, social construction of skill, and intersectionality, to address the research question.

5.1 Summary of the findings

It was found that despite possessing equivalent educational credentials and professional competencies to male colleagues, the interview respondent experiences systematic devaluation of her skills and experience. This devaluation operates through multiple mechanisms: presumptions of female incompetence requiring repeated proof of capability, client preferences for male staff that employers accommodate rather than challenge, exclusion from advancement opportunities despite competent performance, and concentration in support roles while men dominate leadership positions. As Steinberg (1990) established and Liu-Farrer et al. (2021) extended to migration contexts, skill is not an objective measure of capabilities but rather a socially constructed category reflecting power relations. What counts as skill, who possesses it, and how it is compensated are determined through negotiations among states, employers, professional associations, families, and migrant communities all applying criteria shaped by gender ideologies, nationalist hierarchies, racial stereotypes, and class interests rather than purely technical assessments.

There are gendered hierarchies functioning and defining the skills as seen through the interviews. The same professional achievement that generates workplace recognition and brings praise for male do not necessarily translate for women in the same way. The instances of women being denied promotions, however done in subtle passive ways, creates dissatisfactions. The women cannot simultaneously satisfy expectations at workplace, making them perpetually vulnerable to condemnation from some quarter regardless of choices made. Women’s professional competencies are never simply recognized based on merit but remain conditional on conformity to gendered expectations that undermine professional effectiveness. At workplace scale, gender bias systematically disadvantages women despite formal equality policies In this case, women's bodies become sites where multiple expectations converge professional competence must be embodied through appropriate dress and demeanour, cultural respect demonstrated through modest appearance and behaviour, feminine respectability performed through carefully managed interactions with men, and

national/ethnic identity marked through visible markers similar to the discussion of gendered geography done by Pessar and Mahler (2000).

The interview respondents' experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by their positioning as Indian national, young and married/unmarried woman, North Indian with specific regional cultural norms, and worker in IT sector. These intersections create specific configurations of opportunity and constraint. Indian nationality positions them within labour market hierarchies that systematically devalue Global South migrants relative to Western expatriates. In some cases, their professional sector positioning in feminized relative to core technical roles.

The respondents demonstrated sophisticated agency through strategic compliance, emotional management and identity work. Adapting to UAE cultural norms while maintaining Indian identity and pursuing professional goals. They manage discrimination through extra effort and emotional regulation. They build support networks outside official structures. The respondents maintain pride in being Indian despite challenges. These strategies enable survival and success within existing structures, representing pragmatic navigation of severely constrained options.

The respondent have expressed that they feel empowered through work, gaining confidence, economic independence, and decision-making power. These achievements are real and significant, deserving recognition. Yet this empowerment remains constrained by structural inequalities—earning less than male colleagues, working harder for client trust, managing emotional labour of discrimination, conforming to restrictive cultural norms, maintaining family accountability despite distance, and navigating visa dependencies creating employment precarity. This exemplifies Siegmann's (2010) findings of "uncomfortable layers of resilience" in her work. It shows how strengthening at one scale (economic resources, professional competence, spatial mobility) coexists with vulnerability at others (workplace discrimination, family tensions, cultural restrictions). It cannot be presented through heroic narratives showing migration as unambiguous empowerment as well as it cannot be villainous narratives portraying migrants as victims adequately capture this complexity.

By documenting the experiences of the migrant women in I.T. in UAE, this research makes contributions to scholarship at the intersection of feminist migration studies, sociology of work and skill construction, and Gulf migration systems as well. This study demonstrates goes beyond the hero/villain narratives and delve into material forces shaping how

competencies are recognized and compensated. Much migration scholarship debates whether international mobility empowers or oppresses women, with researchers presenting evidence for both positions. This research moves beyond such binary framing by demonstrating how empowerment and constraint operate simultaneously through contradictory subject positions. Women are not either empowered or constrained but rather experience both depending on which domain and scale of analysis is foregrounded.This research address how skill recognition processes documented in Western contexts operate differently in Gulf states due to labour market segmentation by nationality and presents more comprehensive understanding of gendered skilled migration in Gulf contexts.

The research shows the systematic devaluation of women's professional competencies despite formal qualifications, manifesting through experience undervaluation, client preference accommodation, leadership exclusion, and occupational segregation. The women's professional competencies are never simply recognized and compensated based on merit. Instead, recognition remains contingent, incomplete, and conditional on conformity to gendered expectations that undermine professional effectiveness. The interview respondent experiences illuminate these dynamics with painful clarity. She possesses educational credentials qualifying her for professional employment. She successfully navigated competitive selection processes. She performs competently in demanding role managing international clients. Yet her experience is systematically undervalued relative to male colleagues. She must work harder to earn client trust. She faces assumptions that women cannot handle certain tasks. Leadership opportunities remain limited to them. Simultaneously, she manages transnational family relationships requiring intensive emotional labour, adapts to UAE cultural norms while maintaining Indian identity, navigates spatial mobility constraints, and balances multiple identities across contradictory contexts. The economic gains are substantial and shouldn't be minimized. Women I interviewed often earned three to five times what they could make in comparable positions in India, could save significantly, and gained financial security they wouldn't achieve at home. These material improvements matter enormously for women's autonomy and life chances.

What emerges from this research is a nuanced picture that challenges both celebratory narratives of women's empowerment through migration and pessimistic accounts of unrelenting victimization. The thirteen Indian women IT professionals whose experiences form the heart of this study are neither heroes nor victims. They are strategic navigators of

complex terrains, making the best choices available within structural constraints not of their making.

5.2. Recommendations for the future research

This research has examined how skilled Indian women IT professionals experience work and life in the UAE, focusing on how their professional skills are recognized and devalued, how gender shapes workplace experiences, and how they navigate multiple identities across transnational contexts. The findings reveal complex patterns of simultaneous empowerment and constraint, recognition and devaluation, opportunity and limitation.

But this is just one study examining one group of women in one sector in one Gulf country at one moment in time. The patterns identified here require further investigation. How do these dynamics operate differently in other Gulf countries where labour regulations and cultural norms vary? How do they differ across professional sectors where gender composition and cultures vary substantially? How have patterns shifted over time as Gulf economies diversify and international pressure on labour rights increases?

Future research should also examine men's experiences to better understand how gender operates comparatively. Where do male and female experiences converge and diverge? Understanding these comparisons would clarify which challenges are gender-specific and which reflect broader migrant worker vulnerabilities.

Additionally, research should follow women across longer trajectories tracking how experiences evolve over years and decades, how career progression unfolds, how return migration gets navigated, and how Gulf experience shapes live after they leave. The women interviewed represent particular moments in migration trajectories that extend backward into pre-migration histories and forward into post-migration futures deserving investigation.

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Appendix

Interview questionnaire

Gendered Experiences of High-Skilled Indian Women Migrants in the GCC

Section A: Background Information

1. Age:
2. State/District of origin
3. Education (highest degree obtained):
4. Field of specialization / profession:
5. Marital status and family situation (spouse/children in GCC or India):
6. Year of migration to the GCC:
7. Current country and city of residence:
8. Current employment sector and position:

Section B: Migration Pathway

1. What motivated your migration to the GCC? (career growth, salary, family, opportunities, etc.)
2. How did you secure your job? (direct application, company transfer, recruitment agency, networking, etc.)
3. Did you face any challenges in the process of migration (visa, documentation, recognition of qualifications)?
4. How do you perceive the differences in opportunities between men and women during the migration process?

Section C: Professional Experience

1. Can you describe your current role and responsibilities?
2. Do you feel your skills and qualifications are adequately recognized?
3. What gender-specific challenges have you faced in your workplace (e.g., pay gaps, promotions, leadership opportunities, work-life balance)?
4. How would you compare your professional experience in the GCC with what you might expect in India or elsewhere?
5. Do you feel being a woman affects your visibility, authority, or leadership opportunities in your sector?

Section D: Workplace Culture and Gender Norms

1. How would you describe gender relations in your workplace?
2. Do cultural norms of the GCC affect your professional life as a woman (e.g., dress codes, interactions with male colleagues, restrictions)?
3. Have you ever experienced gender-based discrimination, bias, or harassment at work?
4. How do your colleagues and supervisors perceive women professionals from India?

Section E: Life Beyond Work

1. What are your living arrangements? Do you feel safe and independent in your daily life?
2. How do you balance work with family responsibilities, especially if family is split between India and GCC?
3. Do you have access to networks, associations, or communities that support professional women?
4. Do you feel socially included in GCC society, or do you experience gendered/cultural isolation?

Section F: Identity, Empowerment, and Well-being

1. How has migration shaped your identity as a North Indian woman professional?
2. Do you feel empowered through your work in the GCC? In what ways?
3. Have you faced challenges to your mental health or well-being related to migration, work, or gender roles?
4. How do you navigate multiple identities (woman, Indian, migrant, professional) in GCC society?

Section G: Rights, Policies, and Future Aspirations

1. Are you aware of the legal rights and labor protections available to you in your country of residence?
2. Do you feel high-skilled women migrants face fewer or different constraints than men under the Kafala (sponsorship) system?
3. What policies or organizational practices would improve the experience of women like you in the GCC?

4. What are your future aspirations—continuing in the GCC, moving elsewhere, or returning to India?
5. What advice would you give to other women professionals considering migration to the GCC?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your journey and experiences as a high-skilled North Indian woman migrant in the GCC?

Declaration of Use of AI

I would like to clarify that I did not use AI tools to generate text for direct copying or for writing any part of the paper's content. My use of AI was strictly limited to research assistance—specifically, to help identify relevant literature, similar to the functions offered by tools such as Elicit AI. All analysis, writing, and argumentation presented in the paper are entirely my own. Any sources identified through AI-assisted searches were independently cross-verified before inclusion.