Invisible Chains: A Feminist Political Economy of African Female Labour Migration to the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

African female labour migration to the Middle East has accelerated into one of the defining humanitarian and political economy crises of the twenty-first century, yet it continues to be framed primarily within humanitarian discourse rather than analysed as a structural consequence of intersecting global inequalities. This study brings feminist political economy into direct conversation with African feminist theory to examine how African women from Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana are channelled into domestic work in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states under conditions that systematically reproduce exploitation. Against analysis that frames African female migrants as uniformly victimised, the study draws on African feminist frameworks particularly the work of Amadiume, Mama, and Nzegwu to recover the forms of knowledge, collective action, and survival strategy that migrant women deploy even within structurally hostile conditions. The article concludes that meaningful redress demands not regulatory tinkering but a fundamental reorientation of the political economies, both African and Gulf, that sustain this system of organised devaluation. The study employs a feminist critical review methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship, ILO and World Bank data, and human rights documentation. Its objectives are to map the structural drivers of African female migration to the Middle East, to analyse the kafala system as a site of gendered labour governance, and to theorise migrant women's agency within an African feminist frame.

Keywords: African female migration, feminist political economy, kafala, domestic labour

INTRODUCTION

Every year, several hundred thousand African women travel to the Gulf states, Lebanon, and Jordan to work in private households as domestic workers, caregivers, and cleaners. They depart from Addis Ababa, Kampala, Nairobi, Lagos, and Accra carrying debt incurred through recruitment fees, expectations shaped by partial information, and the economic mandates of families and communities who have calculated that one woman's departure is the most viable strategy for collective survival. Many will work under conditions of physical confinement, wage theft, and in some cases direct violence. Many will find their passports confiscated upon arrival. Most will have no enforceable legal recourse when their contracts are violated. Some will not return at all.

Between 2010 and 2022, the number of documented Ethiopian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia alone rose from approximately 65,000 to over 750,000, a figure the International Labour Organization describes as almost certainly an undercount given the volume of undocumented entries through irregular channels (ILO, 2021). In Uganda, official government records indicate that over 6,000 women depart monthly under formal recruitment contracts for Gulf destinations, a flow that has continued despite repeated government suspensions triggered by documented abuse (ILO, 2024). Kenya's Diaspora Affairs data shows that domestic workers represent over sixty percent of Kenyan women formally employed in Gulf Cooperation Council states, with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar as the primary destinations (World Bank, 2023). These numbers are not simply migration statistics; they are evidence of a specific structural relationship between African political economies and Gulf labour markets that has intensified without producing commensurate improvements in worker conditions or governance.

This movement of African women into Gulf domestic service has received growing attention from international human rights organisations, migration scholars, and African governments. Yet a recurrent limitation of much of this attention is its tendency to treat the problem as one of bad actors exploitative employers, corrupt recruitment agents, negligent consular officials rather than as an expression of structural forces that would reproduce exploitation even if every individual actor along the chain behaved in good faith within the existing rules. The conditions African domestic workers face in the Gulf are not aberrations; they are the predictable output of a system whose rules are designed to minimise labour costs by maximising worker vulnerability (LeBaron, 2020; Mezzadri, 2019). To change the outcomes, one must change the system, not merely its personnel.

Feminist political economy provides the most analytically powerful framework for this task. As a tradition of scholarship, it insists that the distinction between productive and reproductive labour is not natural but political a distinction that capitalism has historically exploited to extract care, domestic, and affective labour from women without adequate compensation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). When this insight is brought to bear on the conditions of African female domestic workers in the Gulf, it reveals the connections between individual household abuse and macro-level structures of capital accumulation, colonial history, and gendered state formation that standard human rights frameworks leave analytically invisible. Feminist political economy names the system; African feminist theory insists that African women within that system are more than its products.

African feminist scholars Amadiume (1987), Mama (1995), Nzegwu (2006), Oyěwùmí (1997), Nnaemeka (1998) have generated a body of work that consistently challenges the application of universalising theoretical frameworks to African women's lives without attention to the specificity of African social formations. The Igbo woman who migrates on a family mandate negotiated through umunna networks, the Yoruba woman whose savings cooperative financed her recruitment fees, the Oromo woman whose migration is embedded in community histories of mobility and economic strategy these women inhabit social worlds of considerably more complexity than the category of "female migrant victim" can accommodate. An adequate analysis must hold both the structural reality of exploitation and the social reality of agency, without allowing either to neutralise the other.

The study employs a feminist critical review methodology, synthesising peer-reviewed scholarship published primarily after 2015, ILO and World Bank institutional data, and human rights documentation from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Its objectives are to map the structural drivers of African female migration to the Middle East, to analyse the kafala system as a site of gendered labour governance, and to theorise migrant women's agency within an African feminist framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Foundations of Feminist Political Economy

Feminist political economy developed as a critique of classical political economy's systematic failure to account for the gendered organisation of labour, value, and power. Its central proposition is that capitalism does not simply exploit labour in the abstract, it exploits labour through social relations that are structured by gender, race, and coloniality, and that these structuring relations are not incidental to capitalism's functioning but essential to it (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). The extraction of value from migrant domestic workers in the Gulf is therefore not a distortion of global capitalism but one of its characteristic products a moment in which the gendered and racialised devaluation of reproductive labour is made unusually explicit.

Social reproduction theory, which has experienced significant theoretical renewal in recent years through the work of Bhattacharya (2017), Mezzadri (2019), and others, provides the most direct analytical tool for the present inquiry. This tradition, rooted in the foundational work of Dalla Costa and James (1972) and extended by Federici (2012), argues that all production ultimately depends on reproduction the daily and generational renewal of the workforce through feeding, cleaning, childrearing, care of the sick and elderly, and the provision of emotional stability. This reproductive work is overwhelmingly performed by women, is systematically undervalued by capital, and has increasingly been transferred from Northern middle-class households to migrant women from the global South through what Parreñas (2001) termed the global care chain. Within this chain, African domestic

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workers occupy the terminal link the point at which the transfer of care work from wealthier to poorer reproducing agents cannot be pushed further.

Fraser's (2016, 2022) account of the care crisis under financialised capitalism argues that capital's relentless drive to minimise the costs of social reproduction generates a structural deficit of care in wealthy societies that can only be managed either through public provision, which capital resists, or through the importation of cheap care labour, which capital enables. Gulf states have resolved this crisis through the latter mechanism importing care labour at minimal cost by stripping it of legal protection and binding it to individual employers through kafala. The cost of this solution is borne almost entirely by the migrant workers themselves and by the communities they leave behind.

African Feminist Interventions

African feminist scholarship does not reject this structural analysis but insists that it is incomplete without attention to the specific social formations through which African women experience and navigate global structures. Amadiume's (1987) foundational work on Igbo gender systems demonstrated that African women have operated within social structures that, while patriarchal in specific ways, were not simply reducible to the Western patriarchal model. The parallel economic institutions and political authority that African women have historically exercised through women's organisations, market networks, age-grade associations, and ritual authority constitute resources that shape both migration decisions and survival strategies in ways that feminist political economy frameworks of purely Western derivation cannot capture.

Nzegwu (2006) extends this argument in relation to the family, demonstrating that the Igbo family system operates through forms of collective negotiation and distributed authority that produce differently shaped subject positions for women than the Western nuclear family model assumes. Migrant women from such backgrounds carry social and epistemic resources specific forms of solidarity, reciprocity, and collective obligation that are highly relevant to understanding their behaviour in migration contexts, yet that are invisible to frameworks that model the migrant as an atomised individual economic actor.

Mama's (1995) work on identity and subjectivity introduces the question of how African women's selfhood is produced under conditions of both patriarchal and colonial constraint. Her insistence that African women are producers of knowledge and political subjects rather than objects of development intervention is directly applicable to the migration context. Migrant domestic workers are not simply acted upon by global structures; they act within and against those structures, deploying knowledge, relationships, and practical intelligence in ways that deserve theoretical recognition alongside structural critique.

The synthesis this article proposes feminist political economy as structural analysis, African feminist theory as corrective to its universalising tendencies is the theoretical position from which this article proceeds.

Structural Drivers of African Migration Female to the Gulf

The Postcolonial Development Perspective

The feminisation of African migration to Gulf States is most accurately understood as a compound effect of structural economic conditions in sending states rather than as a simple response to wage differentials. In Ethiopia, which the ILO (2021) identifies as the largest source of African domestic workers in Gulf states, women's unemployment rate in the formal sector stood at 23.4 percent in 2022, compared to 14.1 percent for men, while women accounted for over 80 percent of workers in informal employment categories with no social protection coverage (UN Women, 2023). Kenya's 2022 Labour Force Report found that over 70 percent of employed women were in the informal sector, with median monthly earnings below the national poverty line. Uganda's situation is comparably constrained: the 2021 National Labour Force Survey found that women's real wages in comparable informal categories had declined by approximately 11 percent between 2015 and 2021, partially as a consequence of COVID-19 but also reflecting longer-term structural trends.

These conditions are not natural. They are the cumulative product of structural adjustment programmes that reduced public employment, cut social services, and eliminated the agricultural support systems through which rural women had maintained partial economic independence, compounded by the continuing extraction of African surplus through debt servicing and unequal commodity pricing (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999; Rodney, 1972). The point is not that migration is caused by poverty in some undifferentiated sense migration requires resources, and the poorest women frequently cannot afford to migrate but that the specific configuration of feminised economic precarity in these countries produces a migration compulsion that is structural rather than simply voluntary, and that standard cost-benefit frameworks of migration analysis are inadequate to capture this distinction (Awumbila, 2017; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016).

Recruitment Infrastructure and the Production of Vulnerability

The recruitment industry that channels African women into Gulf domestic employment deserves treatment not as a peripheral mechanism but as a primary site of exploitation in its own right. In a study of Kenyan and Ugandan recruitment pathways, Human Rights Watch (2022) found that ninety-one percent of surveyed domestic workers had paid fees to recruitment agencies in their home country, with median fees equivalent to three to five months of anticipated Gulf wages, creating debt obligations that workers described as their primary reason for remaining in conditions they recognised as exploitative. As one Ugandan worker documented in the report stated: "I could not go back. I had borrowed money from seven people in my village. How would I face them?" (Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 34).

This debt mechanism is not an accident of poor regulation. It creates what LeBaron (2020) terms a debt bondage effect workers arrive in destination countries already financially committed to their employers and unable to exercise the only real bargaining power available to them, namely the credible threat of exit. A worker who has borrowed from family, community networks, or a local money lender to pay recruitment fees cannot less likely to use exit as a bargaining tool. This pre-departure debt structure is not a product of individual naivety but of a recruitment industry that has found in African workers a particularly profitable combination of high demand, low bargaining power, and limited state capacity for regulatory intervention in the countries they come from.

The gendering of recruitment fraud is systematic, African states' regulatory responses have been limited and inconsistent. Ethiopia's 2013 ban on migration to several Gulf states, implemented after a wave of documented abuse cases, reduced formal migration flows in the short term but produced a significant shift to irregular channels that exposed workers to greater rather than lesser vulnerability, and was effectively lifted through bilateral negotiations by 2017 (ILO, 2021). Uganda's serial implementation and suspension of migration bans most recently in 2022 following documented deaths of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia illustrates the structural bind of sending states whose fiscal positions depend on remittance inflows: the political economy of the sending state is itself organised around the continuation of the migration system it claims to regulate (Awumbila, 2017; World Bank, 2023).

Racialisation in the Gulf Labour Market

African domestic workers occupy the lowest tier of an informal but structurally entrenched hierarchy of domestic worker nationalities in Gulf labour markets. Jureidini (2003, 2014) and, more recently, Pande (2022) both document this hierarchy through interview and survey evidence: workers from Philippines command the highest wages in the informal domestic labour market, are preferentially placed in upper-income households, and benefit from the relatively strong bilateral protections the Philippine government has negotiated. South and Southeast Asian workers occupy a middle position. Sub-Saharan African workers Ethiopian, Kenyan, Ugandan, Ghanaian, and Nigerian are consistently placed in lower income households, paid wages at or below the minimum contractual rate, and report significantly higher rates of physical and verbal mistreatment.

This hierarchy is reproduced through structural mechanisms that deserve specific identification. Recruitment agency fee schedules in Gulf destination countries show clear differentiation by worker nationality, with workers from Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia commanding higher market prices that signal their greater perceived value. Online domestic worker hiring platforms in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait include nationality as a searchable

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category, enabling employers to filter candidates by national origin in ways that directly reproduce racialised preferences. African workers entered this market in significantly larger numbers from the early 2000s and the absence of African sending state labour attachés with authority to negotiate standardised minimum contracts means that African workers arrive without the contractual floor that workers from countries with functional bilateral agreements carry, making them more attractive to Gulf employers seeking maximum control at minimum cost (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ILO, 2021).

Kafala and the Legal Architecture of Unfreedom

Kafala as a Governance Technology

Kafala is not a single uniform system; it varies in specific provisions across Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon. Its common architecture, however, binds the migrant's legal right to reside, work, and exit to a specific employer, removing the labour market freedom that constitutes the primary resource through which workers in other sectors bargain for improved conditions. In most GCC states, domestic workers are additionally excluded from national labour law coverage, which removes the secondary protection that might partially offset the loss of labour market mobility (Jureidini, 2003; Vlieger, 2012).

The legal exclusion of domestic workers from labour law protection in most GCC states compounds kafala's effects by removing the alternative enforcement mechanism that might partially offset sponsorship's coercive power. In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, domestic workers are explicitly exempted from the provisions of national labour codes that establish minimum wages, maximum working hours, mandatory rest periods, and rights to form associations or lodge workplace complaints. The state that enforces kafala's migration restrictions simultaneously withdraws the labour protections that would enable workers to contest their conditions within those restrictions. The combination is architecturally coherent: kafala provides the employer with the worker's person; the labour law exclusion ensures the employer retains complete authority over the conditions of that person's work (ILO, 2021; Pande, 2022).

The practical consequences are documented in considerable empirical detail. The ILO's (2021) survey of domestic workers across six Gulf states found that sixty-two percent worked more than twelve hours daily; fifty-seven percent had not received a full rest day in the preceding month; forty-three percent reported having wages withheld for periods exceeding two months without explanation; and thirty-eight percent reported that their employer held their passport. Among sub-Saharan African respondents specifically, these rates were consistently five to twelve percentage points higher than the regional average, consistent with the racialised hierarchy described above. Human Rights Watch (2022) documented specific cases of Ethiopian domestic workers held in informal detention facilities in Lebanon following the 2020 economic collapse, unable to return home because they lacked travel documents their employers retained and because Ethiopian government consular capacity in Beirut had collapsed alongside Lebanese state finances.

Passport confiscation the practice of employers retaining workers' identity documents upon arrival is technically prohibited in most GCC states yet remains pervasive. Human Rights Watch (2022) documented passport confiscation rates of over seventy percent among domestic workers surveyed in Kuwait and Qatar, with employers routinely describing the practice as a matter of common sense or household security rather than recognising it as a violation. Its function within the system is precise, by removing the worker's primary identity document, the employer eliminates the possibility of autonomous movement, removes the worker from any system of official documentation or registration, and creates a practical condition of legal non-existence that prevents access to consular assistance, emergency shelters, or legal representation. Workers who escape abusive households and approach police or immigration authorities may find themselves processed for deportation rather than offered protection, a dynamic that effectively criminalises the exercise of the only exit option available to workers who cannot persuade employers to release them (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Pande, 2022).

The Reform Debate

The reform debate in Gulf labour governance has intensified since 2019, generating disagreement within the scholarly literature that is worth engaging directly rather than resolving by analytical preference. Qatar's 2020 reforms introduced a no-objection certificate system for job mobility, a non-sector specific minimum wage of approximately USD 275 per month, and an electronic wage protection system. Saudi Arabia announced comparable job mobility reforms in November 2020 with implementation from March 2021 although domestic workers were excluded from these reforms. (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Saudi Arabia Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2020). The ILO has maintained a technical cooperation programme with Qatar since 2018 that has generated detailed monitoring data.

Babar (2021) and others argue that this reform trajectory, while imperfect and incomplete, represents genuine institutional movement and that dismissing it wholesale as window dressing misreads the political economy of Gulf states, which do face real reputational costs from international scrutiny and genuine domestic debates about labour governance. Babar's position has empirical support: the ILO's (2023) monitoring report for Qatar found that reported complaints by domestic workers had increased by forty-one percent between 2020 and 2022 following the introduction of an accessible complaint mechanism suggesting that formal channels, when made accessible, are used by workers who previously lacked them.

However, the same ILO (2023) report documents that domestic workers remain excluded from the minimum wage provision in Qatar, and that the job mobility reforms have generated administrative obstacles that prevent workers from using them in practice employer non-compliance with release procedures, delays in processing no-objection certificates, and informal employer pressure that workers are poorly positioned to resist given their continued residence dependency. Amnesty International's (2023) field investigation found that domestic workers in Qatar reported virtually no practical change in their daily conditions following the announced reforms, with the gap between formal policy and lived experience remaining at its pre-reform magnitude.

The more productive analytical position is neither blanket reform optimism nor blanket reform dismissal but precise identification of which specific reforms produce which specific changes for which specific categories of workers. The evidence suggests that reforms implemented through labour ministry mechanisms reach workers in formal enterprise employment while largely failing domestic workers, whose workplace is the private household and whose employer accountability remains structurally unaddressed by reforms calibrated to the formal sector. Abolishing kafala's most coercive provision the requirement that workers obtain employer permission to exit the country would be a meaningful concrete step that does not require the dismantling of the broader sponsorship framework and is therefore politically more achievable than comprehensive kafala abolition, while producing a direct improvement in workers' practical situation (Jureidini, 2014; Pande, 2022).

The Transfer of Care and Its African Dimensions

The global care chain concept, developed by Hochschild (2000) and elaborated by Parreñas (2001) and Yeates (2012), describes the transnational sequences through which care work is transferred from less wealthy to wealthier households by migrant women. In the African case, this chain has a specific feature that distinguishes it from the Latin American or Southeast Asian patterns more commonly discussed in the literature: African domestic workers typically occupy the chain's terminal position because there is no source of cheaper care labour below them in the global economy to absorb the deficit their departure creates in their home households.

The care drain that results from this structure operates at multiple scales. At the household level, documented evidence from Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia consistently shows that a migrant woman's departure removes the primary source of domestic management, childcare, and emotional support from her own family unit, transfers her caregiving responsibilities to older female relatives or to daughters who may reduce school attendance to absorb them, rather than freeing care resources or generating purchased care that adequately substitutes for what has been lost. (UN Women, 2023) At the community level, the systematic outmigration of young women in their prime caregiving years depletes the informal care infrastructure, the community health worker, the informal mutual aid networks women's associations and market cooperatives. This community level care drain is largely invisible in remittance data, which records inflows without accounting for the care services whose withdrawal those inflows partially compensate.

Empirical Evidence and the Limits of the Remittance Narrative

The standard migration economics account emphasises remittances as evidence that migration benefits sending communities: the World Bank (2023) estimates that remittances to sub-Saharan Africa exceeded USD 53 billion in 2022, representing a larger capital inflow than foreign direct investment and official development assistance combined in most African low-income countries. This is a real and significant resource transfer, and the feminist political economy account requires engaging with it rather than treating it as irrelevant.

The qualification the evidence demands is not that remittances are insignificant but that they are distributed unequally, arrive under conditions of considerable uncertainty, and substitute for public provision rather than supplementing it in ways that represent genuine development. In a longitudinal study of Kenyan and Ethiopian migrant households, the ILO (2021) found that sixty-four percent of remittances were used for immediate consumption food, school fees, medical bills rather than investment, reflecting the depth of the poverty that makes migration necessary and the insufficiency of domestic income to cover basic household needs. Remittances that cover school fees released by the abolition of public education subsidies, or medical bills generated by the dismantling of public health systems, are not development capital; they are a private tax on migrant workers that finances the public services their governments have ceased to provide.

The feminist dimension of this substitution is specific: the remittance flows that sustain African households are generated by the labour of women who are themselves denied adequate social protection in destination countries, who carry debt incurred through recruitment, and whose own health, rest, and psychological wellbeing are consumed in the process of generating the income that their households require for survival. The care deficit at the destination household end of the chain is resolved through the exploitation of African female labour; the care deficit at the source household end is partially addressed through the same women's remittances, financed by that exploitation. In neither location does the actual cost of the care being provided receive adequate recognition.

Agency, Negotiation, and Collective Action

The agency of African migrant domestic workers in Gulf states is not a theoretical proposition to be asserted against structural analysis; it is an empirically documented reality that takes specific forms under specific constraints. Human Rights Watch (2022) and Fernandez (2020) both document the existence of informal worker networks in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Lebanon through which Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Ugandan domestic workers share information about employer reputations, co-ordinate emergency accommodation for workers who have escaped abusive situations, pool resources for repatriation, and provide each other with emotional support across the physical isolation that kafala's household confinement produces. These networks operate through encrypted messaging applications, through church communities where Sunday attendance provides the only legitimate occasion for leaving the employer's residence, and through contacts maintained with embassy welfare officers in countries where African sending states maintain active consular presence.

The scale and sophistication of these networks varies considerably, a variation that is itself analytically instructive. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church diaspora community in Riyadh has operated as a documented mutual aid network for Ethiopian domestic workers, providing emergency accommodation, community-funded return tickets, and informal legal advice based on accumulated community knowledge of Saudi administrative procedures (Fernandez, 2020). Kenyan workers in Kuwait have maintained Facebook groups, subsequently shifted to WhatsApp, in which employer assessments are shared in real time a form of community-generated labour market information that partially compensates for the information asymmetry between workers and employers at the point of recruitment (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Networks, Resistance, and Collective Survival

Empirical documentation of African migrant women's collective action in Gulf states, while limited due to the conditions under which such action must occur, is consistent and significant. Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Ugandan domestic workers in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar have built informal support networks using messaging applications, church communities, and embassy contacts that perform functions the formal governance system refuses to provide: sharing information about abusive employers, co-ordinating temporary accommodation for workers who have escaped harmful household situations, pooling resources to fund repatriation for workers stranded without wages, and providing emotional support across the physical isolation of dispersed domestic service (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ILO, 2021).

These networks operate under conditions of real legal risk collective activity by migrant workers violates both kafala restrictions and the domestic law of most destination states and their persistence under those conditions is evidence of a political culture of solidarity that deserves recognition as such. The church has played a particularly significant role in several Gulf states, where small African Christian congregations have functioned as nodes of mutual aid, information exchange, and psychological sustenance that partially offset the isolation produced by kafala's atomising logic. This is not the organised labour politics of collective bargaining the conditions for that are systematically prevented by the legal framework but it is a form of politics, rooted in African communal values, that sustains life and sometimes alters individual outcomes even when it cannot alter structural conditions.

Nego-Feminism and the Politics of Survival

Nnaemeka's (1998) concept of nego-feminism a feminism centred on negotiation, accommodation, and strategic manoeuvre rather than direct confrontation captures something essential about the survival strategies of African domestic workers in Gulf settings. Many workers describe practices of emotional management, deliberate performance of deference, strategic deployment of religious commonality with employers, and careful calibration of when and how to press claims that reflect sophisticated political intelligence developed under conditions of extreme constraint. These are not expressions of passivity or internalised subordination; they are forms of practical reason cultivated in response to conditions in which direct confrontation carries severe risks while complete compliance yields unacceptable outcomes.

Mama's (1995) argument that African women's resistance typically works through rather than simply against constraining structures is equally applicable. Workers who cultivate warm personal relationships with specific household members, children, elderly relatives, sympathetic female employers as a strategy for accessing better working conditions, reduced hours, or permission to maintain a mobile phone are not betraying feminist politics, they are practising a politics adequate to their actual conditions. The recovery of these strategies as forms of agency does not diminish the critique of the structures that make them necessary; it insists on the full humanity of the women who navigate those structures with resources far more limited than those available to the advocacy organisations that speak on their behalf.

Structural Limits on Agency

Recognising agency requires being equally precise about its limits. The collective action described above is informal, fragile, and unable to alter the structural conditions it responds to. Workers who are moved by employers from Riyadh to provincial cities lose access to the networks built in the capital. Workers whose phones are confiscated a routine employer practice documented in sixty-one percent of cases in ILO (2021) survey data lose their primary connection to mutual aid networks. Workers who are repatriated following a complaint cannot maintain community networks from Ethiopia or Uganda. The conditions that make agency necessary are also the conditions that most consistently undermine its effectiveness. This is the core irony that structural analysis is equipped to name and that agency centred frameworks alone cannot resolve.

Policy: Concrete Pathways Grounded in Evidence

The policy implications of a feminist political economy analysis diverge significantly from the agenda of mainstream migration governance institutions, which has been dominated by labour rights reform, bilateral agreement negotiation, and anti-trafficking campaigns. These interventions are not worthless they address real dimensions of the problem but they operate within a framework that accepts the existing global economy as a given and seeks to reduce its worst effects without addressing its organising dynamics.

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On kafala, the demand must be not reform but abolition. The system's core feature binding a migrant worker's legal existence to a specific employer is not salvageable by incremental modification. What is required is its replacement with a system in which migrant workers hold legal rights independently of any employment relationship, can change employers at will within the law, and have enforceable access to labour protections regardless of their workplace's classification as public or private. The specific and persistent exclusion of domestic workers from labour law coverage must end: domestic work is work, and its performers are workers entitled to the same legal floor as workers in any other sector. The ILO's Convention No. 189 (2011) on Decent Work for Domestic Workers provides this floor, and its ratification by all GCC states should be a non-negotiable demand of any credible labour rights programme. The continued failure of every GCC state to ratify Convention 189 more than a decade after its adoption is itself politically significant and should be named as such in international diplomatic forums (ILO, 2021).

On bilateral agreements: Kenya's Bilateral Labour Agreement with Qatar, signed in 2019 and revised in 2022, represents a recent African precedent for the kind of standardised minimum contract, pre-departure orientation, and welfare fund provisions that the Philippine bilateral agreement model has demonstrated are achievable (World Bank, 2023). Ethiopia negotiated comparable agreements with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the period following its migration ban, though enforcement has been inconsistent. Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, Ghana's Overseas Employment Centre, Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Kenya's State Department for Diaspora Affairs, and Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs all maintain nominal mandates over overseas employment that have produced inadequate practical results. Effective sending state action requires institutional capacity to negotiate and enforce bilateral labour agreements, the resources to maintain functional labour attaché operations in destination countries, robust pre-departure orientation programmes that provide workers with accurate information about their rights and available support, and welfare funds from which emergency assistance can be rapidly deployed without bureaucratic delay. This is not a call for structural transformation; it is a call for the basic diplomatic investment that African states have historically deferred while sending states whose workers lack these protections bear the consequences.

The feminist political economy framework demands attention to the structural conditions that produce migration compulsion in the first place. Regulatory reform at the destination end of the migration system cannot substitute for investment in African women's economic security at the source end. This means expanding women's access to formal sector employment through anti-discrimination regulation and targeted investment, rebuilding public education and healthcare systems that structural adjustment dismantled, regulating the recruitment industry as a public service rather than a profit-seeking industry, and establishing social protection floors that reduce the economic pressure driving migration compulsion. These are large tasks, and none will be accomplished quickly. But they are the tasks that the structural analysis identifies as necessary, and the failure to name them in migration policy discourse is itself a political choice a choice to manage symptoms while leaving causes intact (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999; UN Women, 2023).

Finally, on migrant women's participation: Policy processes that exclude the knowledge of migrant workers themselves will produce interventions poorly calibrated to actual conditions. The ILO's (2021) Domestic Workers Voices initiative, which integrates structured interviews with domestic workers into policy design processes, provides a methodological model that African sending states and Gulf receiving states should adopt as a standard component of bilateral agreement review processes rather than an occasional supplement to expert-led policy development.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that African female labour migration to Gulf States is produced by a configuration of structural forces postcolonial economic marginalisation in sending states, the racialised governance architecture of kafala, and the global care economy's systematic undervaluation of reproductive labour that cannot be addressed through regulatory reform alone. But it has also argued that this structural analysis is incomplete without empirical attention to migrant women's documented agency, the variation in migration outcomes across workers and contexts, and the specific reforms that have produced measurable, if partial, improvements in particular workers' conditions.

The engagement with counter-positions in the literature is not a rhetorical concession but an analytical necessity. Migration to Gulf States produces genuine material improvements in some African women's lives alongside the exploitation that structural analysis identifies. Kafala reform in Qatar has created some functional complaint mechanisms alongside the persistent coverage gaps that Amnesty International documents. Ethiopia's migration ban reduced formal flows while intensifying irregular migration's risks. These complexities do not dissolve the structural critique; they specify the conditions under which particular interventions produce particular effects, which is precisely the information needed to develop policy responses that work.

The policy conclusions drawn here, extension of labour law coverage to domestic workers, bilateral agreement investment, zero-fee recruitment mandates, remittance investment mechanisms, migrant worker participation in policy processes are grounded in documented precedents rather than in aspirational visions of structural transformation. They do not resolve the deeper political economy contradictions that produce migration compulsion; those contradictions are real and will require changes in international trade and financial governance that extend far beyond migration policy. But they represent the achievable near-term changes that would materially improve the conditions of women who are migrating now, under conditions that no analysis, however structurally sophisticated, can justify leaving unaddressed.

The invisible chains of this article's title are real, institutional, and documented in detail. So is the capacity of African women to contest them, with resources far more limited than those available to the institutions that govern their migration. The task for scholarship is to make both the chains and the contestation analytically visible; the task for policy is to reduce the conditions that make such extraordinary endurance necessary.

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