

# Sri Lankan Women Migrant Workers in the Gulf:

Understanding Crisis Diplomacy  
In Times of Geopolitical Tensions

Janani Kandaramage and Piyumani Ranasinghe

August 2026



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## **Sri Lankan Women Migrant Workers in the Gulf: Understanding Crisis Diplomacy in Times of Geopolitical Tensions**

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**Abstract:** *This Policy Brief examines how the US-Iran war in West Asia has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of Sri Lankan Women Migrant Workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As Sri Lanka's principal destination for labour migration and its largest source of remittance income, geopolitical instability in the Gulf has disrupted steady employment for Sri Lanka's migrant women workers. These disruptions have jeopardised their ability to earn a sustained income for dependents at home. This study, therefore, focuses on the disproportionate risks faced by women in the backdrop of the current conflict, particularly women who are overrepresented in low-skilled domestic roles. Safeguards in such unskilled occupations are limited, thus heightening their exposure to employer exploitation. Drawing on international literature on the 'feminisation' of labour migration, this paper advocates for more equitable local employment opportunities, improved emergency preparedness during external shocks, and strengthened gender-sensitive migration governance.*

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# **Sri Lankan Women Migrant Workers in the Gulf: Understanding Crisis Diplomacy in Times of Middle Eastern Geopolitical Tensions**

## **Contents**

|        |                                                                                                   |    |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1.0    | Introduction.....                                                                                 | 6  |
| 1.1    | South Asian Labour Migration to the Gulf Region.....                                              | 6  |
| 1.2    | Sri Lanka's Prevalence in the Gulf Corridor.....                                                  | 6  |
| 1.3    | Research Problem.....                                                                             | 7  |
| 1.4    | Research Statement .....                                                                          | 8  |
| 1.5    | Research Objectives .....                                                                         | 8  |
| 1.6    | Research Questions .....                                                                          | 8  |
| 1.7    | Research Methodology.....                                                                         | 9  |
| 2.0    | Effectiveness of Sri Lanka's Current Migration Governance Framework .....                         | 9  |
| 2.1    | Sri Lanka Foreign Bureau of Employment Act, No. 21 of 1985 .....                                  | 9  |
| 2.2    | National Labour Migration Policy (2008).....                                                      | 10 |
| 2.3    | Family Background Report (FBR) of 2013.....                                                       | 11 |
| 2.4    | Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) National Plan Roadmap in 2022 ..... | 11 |
| 3.0    | Effectiveness of International Labour Agreements in Crisis.....                                   | 12 |
| 4.0    | Sri Lankan Women's Labour Migration to the Gulf: Structural Drivers and Vulnerabilities .....     | 16 |
| 4.1    | Why Women Migrate: Gendered Economic and Social Drivers .....                                     | 16 |
| 4.2    | Barriers to Women's Domestic Labour-Market Participation.....                                     | 18 |
| 4.3    | Vulnerabilities in Gulf Employment.....                                                           | 18 |
| 5.0    | How Geopolitical Conflict Amplifies Existing Vulnerabilities.....                                 | 19 |
| 5.1    | Employment and Income Insecurity during Conflict.....                                             | 19 |
| 5.2    | Gaps in Crisis Preparedness and Consular Protection .....                                         | 20 |
| 5.3    | Remittance Dependence and Macroeconomic Vulnerability .....                                       | 20 |
| 5.4    | Involuntary Return and Implications for Reintegration .....                                       | 21 |
| 6.0    | Policy Recommendations.....                                                                       | 22 |
| 6.1    | Immediate Priorities .....                                                                        | 22 |
| 6.1.1. | Establish a Gender-Responsive Crisis Early Warning and Response Mechanism                         | 22 |
| 6.1.2. | Reform emergency insurance to cover conflict-related employment disruption                        | 23 |
| 6.1.3  | Ensure Immediate Gender-Responsive Reintegration Support for Crisis Returnees                     |    |

|                                                                                                    |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| .....                                                                                              | 23 |
| 6.2 Medium Term Priorities .....                                                                   | 23 |
| 6.2.1. Establish an integrated, gender-disaggregated migrant data and Communication System .....   | 23 |
| 6.2.2. Create secure alternative registration and communication channels.....                      | 24 |
| 6.2.3. Establish a Specialised Inter-Agency Migration Crisis Response Unit .....                   | 24 |
| 6.3 Long-Term Priorities.....                                                                      | 24 |
| 6.3.1. Align national skills development with higher-value employment opportunities..              | 24 |
| 6.3.2. Remove gender-based barriers to women's employment .....                                    | 25 |
| 6.3.3 Diversify labour and remittance-generating destinations through middle-power diplomacy ..... | 25 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                                   | 26 |
| Reference List .....                                                                               | 27 |

## **List of Abbreviations**

| <b>Abbreviation/Acronym</b> | <b>Definition</b>                                            |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BLA</b>                  | Bilateral Labour Agreement                                   |
| <b>CBSL</b>                 | Central Bank of Sri Lanka                                    |
| <b>CSO</b>                  | Civil Society Organisation                                   |
| <b>DCS</b>                  | Department of Census and Statistics                          |
| <b>FBR</b>                  | Family Background Report                                     |
| <b>GCC</b>                  | Gulf Cooperation Council                                     |
| <b>GCM</b>                  | Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration        |
| <b>ILO</b>                  | International Labour Organisation                            |
| <b>IOM</b>                  | International Organisation for Migration                     |
| <b>IPS</b>                  | Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka                     |
| <b>MFA</b>                  | Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism |
| <b>MOU</b>                  | Memorandum of Understanding                                  |
| <b>NOC</b>                  | No Objection Certificate                                     |
| <b>SLBFE</b>                | Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment                       |
| <b>UN</b>                   | United Nations                                               |
| <b>UAE</b>                  | United Arab Emirates                                         |
| <b>U.S</b>                  | United States                                                |

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 South Asian Labour Migration to the Gulf Region

For many low-wage South Asian workers, the journey to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represents their desperate need to break the cycle of financial hardship at home, by pursuing economic stability abroad. The GCC is a regional, political, and economic alliance that is comprised of six Arab nations including: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait (Gulf Cooperation Council Secretariat General, n.d). Together, these nations currently serve as pivotal economic hubs in the world, whose rapid advancement has been largely sustained by migrant workers, particularly South Asians who constitute approximately 60% of the GCC workforce (Chand, 2023). For South Asian migrants, their labour-intensive activity contributes a vital source of income for their families at home (Chand, 2023). This mutual economic dependence suggests that disruptions to employment security, arising from geopolitical instability can potentially diminish household incomes, disproportionately affecting migrant women with dependents at home.

Labour migration to the Gulf surged in the 1970s due to the ‘Oil Boom,’ when the quadrupling of global oil prices in 1973 accumulated unprecedented wealth for Gulf nations (Gunaratne, 2023). This uptick in wealth led to rapid infrastructural development, triggering an explosion in job opportunities that exceeded the capacity of local populations to meet, consequently raising the demand for foreign workers to fill excess positions (Gunaratne, 2023). However, this dependence inadvertently produced a deeply segmented labour market, in which South Asian migrant workers are primarily relegated to low-skilled sectors such as construction, hospitality and domestic work. The pre-existing precarity of migrant work environments, therefore, further intensifies their vulnerabilities to job insecurities caused by the spillover effects of emergencies such as the 2026 Iran war.

### 1.2 Sri Lanka’s Prevalence in the Gulf Corridor

A total of 1,007,855 Sri Lankan nationals were residing in 14 Gulf countries, out of which 660,000 are employed, as per data produced in February 2026 (Sri Lanka Bureau for Foreign Employment (SLBFE), 2026). The table below is illustrative of Sri Lankan distribution across the Gulf states.

| Destination  | Sri Lankan Migrant Population |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| UAE          | 350,000                       |
| Saudi Arabia | 246,139                       |
| Kuwait       | 175,000                       |
| Qatar        | 140,000                       |
| Bahrain      | 13,130                        |
| Oman         | 32,000                        |
| Jordan       | 14,500                        |

*Table 1: Composition of Sri Lankan migrants in Gulf countries (2026)*

In addition, roughly more than 80% of total migrant departures from Sri Lanka are directed to the Middle East, indicating the region’s status as Sri Lanka’s principal overseas labour export market (Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL), 2025).<sup>1</sup> The Gulf corridor’s position as Sri Lanka’s

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<sup>1</sup> While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) comprises six states within the broader region commonly referred

primary destination for overseas employment, establishes it as a key contributor to Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings, via remittance inflows and reserve accumulation. In fact, workers' remittances constitute one of Sri Lanka's largest sources of foreign income, with cumulative remittance inflows reaching US\$ 4.6 billion in only the first half of 2026 (CBSL, 2026). This figure was surpassed only by merchandise exports, which stood at approximately US\$7.07 billion (CBSL, 2026).

This distinct dependence on the Middle East, a region susceptible to frequent waves of geostrategic volatility, risks constraining the foreign exchange Sri Lanka requires to consolidate its transition from economic recovery to macroeconomic stabilisation. Such volatility further aggravates the already unsustainable labour conditions and agency of migrant women, many of whom bear caregiving responsibilities for dependents at home.

During KIIs, an expert mentioned that migrant workers act as agents of diplomacy by not only fostering critical economic interdependence through remittances, but also by serving as cultural ambassadors. Their significance in enabling Sri Lanka to project soft power makes defending their rights of migrant workers vital for preserving Sri Lanka's leverage in the global political economy.

### **1.3 Research Problem**

Sri Lanka's overreliance on the Gulf Labour Corridor has hindered the prospect of a mutually beneficial partnership under the current conditions, instead institutionalising an asymmetric relationship of dependence (Seneviratne et al., 2023). Its inability to sufficiently diversify labour destination markets constrains its diplomatic leverage over the recruitment conditions and regulatory frameworks of Gulf states. This asymmetry also limits Sri Lanka's capacity to respond effectively when geopolitical tensions escalate, as the protection of migrant workers increasingly depends on the State's ability to engage in timely and coordinated crisis diplomacy with host governments and international partners.

Crisis diplomacy is understood as the urgent diplomatic actions, negotiations and communication strategies undertaken to manage sudden, high-stakes situations that threaten peace and stability (Diplo Foundation, n.d.), and is therefore particularly relevant to Sri Lanka's migration governance. In the context of escalating tensions in the Gulf, Sri Lankan diplomatic missions must be capable of rapidly mobilising information-sharing, consular assistance, humanitarian support and, where necessary, evacuation arrangements. Strengthening crisis diplomacy should therefore form part of Sri Lanka's broader strategy to reduce the vulnerabilities generated by its dependence on the Gulf labour corridor.

This asymmetry has specific implications for female migrant workers, whose participation in Gulf migration has historically been concentrated in low-skilled, informal forms of employment such as domestic work (Weeraratne, 2014). During KIIs, experts mentioned that this has changed at present, with many now migrating for skilled employment in sectors such as hospitality and beauty services. Gender-segregated labour markets are characterised by low bargaining power and weakened access to legislative protections (Weeraratne and Gunawardena, 2025). This vulnerability is further exacerbated during periods of geopolitical instability. Amidst escalating regional tensions, these gender-specific vulnerabilities can

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to as the "Middle East," the authors acknowledge that the latter is a contested geographical and political term with significant political, historical and academic implications. The authors do not endorse the term as a neutral or objective designation. It is used in this Policy Brief solely for contextual and analytical purposes, including where it reflects terminology used in the sources cited.

become acute, particularly where women are confined to private households and have limited access to public authorities or diplomatic missions. This uncertainty of a wartime environment may consequently heighten the risks of wage theft, displacement and gender-based violence, leaving migrant women caught between remaining in insecure employment and returning to limited economic opportunities at home.

#### **1.4 Research Statement**

In the context of the 2026 Iran war, gender sensitive evacuation contingency plans remain insufficient, particularly given the historically entrenched gendered vulnerabilities within Sri Lanka's labour migration systems. This policy brief, therefore, rests on the premise that resolving this asymmetry and improving safeguards for Sri Lankan migrant women requires a dual policy approach. This dual policy approach involves both embedding gender sensitivity into its engagement with Gulf stakeholders while also addressing the structural barriers that disincentivise women's domestic labour force participation and sustain dependence on low-skilled overseas employment, even when such destinations remain high-risk environments.

#### **1.5 Research Objectives**

This policy brief has been constructed around four core research objectives:

1. To identify the pre-existing gendered push factors and vulnerabilities within Sri Lanka's labour migration system that increase these women's exposure to the dangers of conflict.
2. To examine how the socioeconomic and political disruptions caused by the US-Iran war exacerbate the vulnerabilities of Sri Lanka's low-skilled migrant workforce, which predominantly employs women.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of migration governance frameworks and emergency-response mechanisms in defending migrant workers affected by regional instability, with particular emphasis on women. In doing so, the brief will identify policy gaps that inhibit crisis management capacity.
4. To propose practical policy recommendations that advocate gender-responsive migration governance, expand sustainable domestic opportunities for women through reskilling and upskilling, and strengthen Sri Lanka's resilience to external shocks via bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

#### **1.6 Research Questions**

Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent has the ongoing war in West Asia undermined the job security and socioeconomic resilience of Sri Lankan migrant women workers?
2. How do geopolitical volatilities interact with pre-existing gendered vulnerabilities to add to the precarities of Sri Lankan migrant women?
3. How effective are Sri Lanka's existing governance responses in crisis control for migrant women amidst geopolitical instability, and what are the key gaps?
4. What gender-sensitive policy responses can be adopted both domestically and internationally to strengthen women's access to high-value employment?

## **1.7 Research Methodology**

This policy brief is a qualitative study encompassing desk research and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The desk research included analysing primary and secondary sources, including legislative and policy review. As such, the Sri Lanka Foreign Bureau of Employment Act, No. 21 of 1985 and National Labour Migration Policy introduced in 2008, and the National Policy on Migration and Employment, 2023-2027 were analysed. Secondary sources included reports from the SLBFE, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL), which aided in tracing trends in migration flows, worker profiles, remittances, complaints, and the degree of female labour force participation. Further, official UN documents and International Labour Organisation (ILO) Reports on foreign policy were also studied to assess the effectiveness of current crisis and response practices. In addition, an amalgamation of academic journal articles and studies produced by Amnesty International and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was also used. The study utilised textual analyses of concepts such as human security, gender theory, labour economics and middle power diplomacy. The convergence of these theoretical perspectives enhances this brief's capacity to map how intersectional structural inequalities underpin various labour migration outcomes for Sri Lankan migrant women workers.

Five KIIs were conducted with experts between August and September 2026 to gather empirical insights into the prevalence of gender-blind emergency protocols in impeding inclusive crisis response. This provides an evidence-based grounding that adds credibility to the distinct vulnerabilities assessed and the failures of existing wartime relief frameworks.

Due to time limitations in the preparation of this policy brief, a quantitative survey of migrant experiences was not conducted. Hence, this research relies solely on publicly available information.

This policy brief also does not dwell on the specificities of the war, instead dedicating most of its attention to the gendered consequences. Assigning this brief a gendered lens helps emphasise the need for more feminist-oriented policymaking in both local and global governance.

## **2.0 Effectiveness of Sri Lanka's Current Migration Governance Framework**

Sri Lanka maintains an extensive governance architecture to manage labour migration, encompassing recruitment oversight and safeguards to migrant rights. However, a question arises as to whether the presence of these instruments translates into meaningful security and institutional resilience against external geopolitical shocks, such as the current US-Iran war.

### **2.1 Sri Lanka Foreign Bureau of Employment Act, No. 21 of 1985**

Certified on June 7, 1985, this foundational legislation established the SLBFE as the formal authority to supervise overseas recruitment and ensure migrant welfare. Section 15 extends the Bureau's mandate beyond licensing recruitment agencies, authorising it to negotiate bilateral employment contracts with destination countries and monitor trends in labour migration to enable evidence-based policymaking. Section 48 expands on these welfare facilities to administer pre-departure training programs and orientation to reduce their susceptibility to exploitation, while governing the 'Workers Welfare Fund.' This fund finances mandatory insurance schemes, medical and repatriation costs, and rehabilitation support for Sri Lankan migrant women and their families (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2014).

This year, the Cabinet has formally approved the repeal of this Act, drafting a new foreign employment bill to replace it. The new bill strives to mitigate the shortcomings of the previous legislation via improved digital access to complaint and consular services on the Lanka Konnect platform. It will also robustly control unfair recruitment practices via a specialised investigation unit (MFA, 2026). However, the proposed bill retains some of the archaic practices of the previous legislation (MFA, 2026). It lacks essential gender-disaggregated risk monitoring and an integrated approach with other ministries and civil society organisations (CSOs), essential for timely, intersectional responses to regional instability.

Although these provisions strengthen risk mitigation and formalise the labour migration network, the framework is largely reactive rather than anticipatory. It lacks a comprehensive roadmap for anticipating and coordinating emergency responses to sudden strains on employment security, freedom of movement, and consular support during periods of economic and political instability. The absence of cross-agency crisis coordination and transparent mechanisms for evacuation in particular amplifies the potential risk of displacement and financial insecurity for migrant women concentrated in the under-regulated, low-cost labour sector across the volatile Middle East.

## **2.2 National Labour Migration Policy (2008)**

This policy framework marks a shift from treating migrant workers as sources of foreign exchange to one centred on their empowerment and access to justice. The rights-based approach seeks to reconcile the economic benefits of migration with commitments to secure equitable working conditions for low-skilled migrants (ILO, 2008). In fact, the mandate explicitly acknowledged that the State recognises sector-specific abuse, particularly those employed in under-regulated domestic employment, such as women. To resolve these gendered concerns, the policy mandates the consistent resourcing of pre-departure women-oriented modules within the SLBFE (United Nations Network on Migration, 2008). Technical training includes financial literacy, household management, English fluency and the development of other key linguistic skills (SLBFE, n.d.).

However, these measures predominantly concentrate on pre-departure prevention, while the most critical vulnerabilities often emerge after deployment, or when conflict disrupts job stability and forces a migrant worker to be repatriated. At present, crisis diplomacy is lacking in encouraging the reintegration of migrant women into the local economy, especially when their skills do not align with local labour market demands.

The subsequent National Policy on Migration and Employment, 2023-2027, was developed through a review of the 2008 legislation and varied stakeholder consultation (Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment (MLFE), 2023). Although the initiative explicitly recognises the need for crisis preparedness through multi-stakeholder consultation, they do not help combat the systemically entrenched employer dependency (ILO, 2024). Implementing measures such as targeted relief in the form of insurance schemes for migrant families and revising the National Disaster Act No.13 of 2005 to include international disasters to fund cross-border evacuations (ILO, 2024) only provide temporary relief. They do not address limited domestic opportunities and gender inequities that compel women to remain in precarious overseas work in the volatile West Asia. The revised policy's incapacity to embed integrated inter-agency coordination undermines policy coherence, fragmenting support and therefore delaying crisis responses. This operational disconnect further complicates a woman's ability to make informed decisions about remaining in the host country or returning home.

### **2.3 Family Background Report (FBR) of 2013**

In 2013, this regulatory requirement was introduced to minimise the documented psychological, social, and educational harm endured by children when their primary caregivers migrate for work abroad (Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), 2015). The formal document prohibits female migrant workers with children under the age of two from migrating for overseas employment (Arambepola, 2022). In fact, women seeking work as housemaids in the Gulf states, for instance, are required to submit a Childcare Plan Report. This report is mandated to outline the legally appointed guardians, educational arrangements, and health and safety guarantees for their minor children. Therefore, it is an additional administrative burden to poorer, semi-skilled mothers seeking low-wage employment, fostering incentives to circumvent traditional migration channels (Arambepola, 2022).

These provisions present two distinct challenges: women using poorly regulated migration pathways to bypass the bureaucracy of FBR are subject to reduced state oversight and safeguards. These irregular routes make their movements harder to trace, verify, and protect, raising their vulnerability to abuse. The ongoing war with Iran further exacerbates their exposure to abuse as disrupted communication infrastructure impedes all means to map and assess specific vulnerabilities during crisis. The basis of FBR is misogynistic, placing the burden of childcare on women, rather than remedying the structurally embedded economic pressures and little alternatives that shove them towards labour migration (ILO, 2025). This framework, therefore, should pivot from solely policing women's mobility, to building the conditions that make migration voluntary and resilient via local employment opportunities and reskilling efforts.

### **2.4 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) National Plan Roadmap in 2022**

Adopted in Sri Lanka via a phased implementation process, the 2018 UN framework was operationalised through an inaugural 2022-2025 roadmap. It has since been advanced into the updated 2026-2028 National Action Plan (IOM, 2025). The initiative advocates for strengthened border enforcement to combat migrant smuggling, safeguarding low-income women from exploitation (EconomyNext, 2026). It also acknowledges the need for tailored, trauma informed medical and psychological care, safe shelters engineered for women and girls enduring more severe forms of gender-based violence (United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), 2025). However, these broad commitments overlook the sufferings of women whose migrant status is undocumented, thus possibly alienating them from emergency relief measures during geopolitical shocks. Further revisions to the GCM should further address the absence of robust strategies for identifying, assisting and digitally reconnecting with women who remain in the margins of formal migration systems, and are therefore invisibilised to emergency relief structures. Strengthening women's financial resilience against geopolitical shocks, including the ongoing war through local skills development can foster high-value employment both at home and abroad, stemming coercive labour practices.

### 3.0 Effectiveness of International Labour Agreements in Crisis

Sri Lanka's labour agreements with the GCC states are vital instruments which ideally aim to create a rules-based bargaining relationship in securing diplomatic leverage to protect rights of their migrant workers. The table below illustrates their effectiveness during geopolitical emergencies depending on whether they can translate into timely, coordinated, and gender responsive assistance when income and mobility security are jeopardised.

| International Labour Agreement | Context                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Shortcomings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Mitigation Strategy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BLA with Saudi Arabia          | <p>Formalised in January 2014, the deal ensures fair labour practices and unified, compliant recruitment via licensed agencies (Amirthalingam et al., 2025).</p> <p>Central terms and conditions of the agreement involve direct bank remittances to workers, standard contracts in language accessible to workers, and prohibiting employer passport retention (Embassy of Riyadh in Sri Lanka, 2026).</p> <p>These clauses address the predicaments faced by migrant workers in low-skilled, contractually uncertain, employer-dependent roles, where women are disproportionately represented. Addressing their concerns implies this framework is fairly gender sensitive.</p> | <p>These conditions are primarily transactional, omitting obligations that could offer sufficient insulation to vulnerable domestic migrant workers against wider geostrategic friction.</p> <p>Moreover, it also reinforces Sri Lanka's asymmetrical relationship with the GCC by treating Sri Lankan domestic workers as a flexible and relatively inexpensive labour force with little avenues for skills recognition and socioeconomic mobility. Overlooking this structural deficit risks sustaining Sri Lanka's overreliance on the Middle East for low-wage employment</p> | <p>Embed gender-responsive into crisis responsive clauses: Temporary extension of consular jurisdictions upon a joint declaration of regional security threats to grant Sri Lankan diplomatic personnel and accredited humanitarian teams the right of physical entry to specific residential zones to examine, verify and ensure the welfare of domestic women migrants in secluded environments.</p> <p>Mandatory integration of Saudi Arabia's "Musaned digital payroll system" with the SLBFE to enable automated, real-time tracing of prompt or delayed wage payment deposits.</p> |
| BLA with Qatar                 | <p>Signed in 2008, under the title "Agreement concerning the regulation of Sri Lankan Manpower Employment in the State of Qatar," it aims to manage and organise the flow of Sri Lankan workers to Qatar in alignment with the National legislation of both nations (Seneviratne et al., 2023).</p> <p>Obligates all individual</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>This agreement is also primarily employment centric, overlooking the necessity for a bilateral crisis coordination program, tailored to resolve the distinct concerns of economically vulnerable migrant women.</p> <p>The lack of provisions</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>Reformulate the agreement to adopt a more gender-inclusive approach like the Bilateral Labour Agreement with Saudi Arabia.</p> <p>Specific measures include legislating and enforcing a joint crisis protocol within the existing Sri</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | <p>employment to be registered and attested by the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Qatar and the SLBFE (Embassy of Sri Lanka in Qatar, n.d.). Defines the duties of Qatari employers in terms of decent work conditions, establishes joint monitoring between labour authorities of both nations (Seneviratne et al., 2023).</p> <p>Strengthens Sri Lanka's bargaining leverage by ensuring joint accountability for specific harms to migrant workers, a testament to the importance of bilateral diplomacy in advancing safeguards for women concentrated in unsafe irregular migration channels and work.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p>tackling emergency relief hinders the institutionalisation of integrated and structured evacuation procedures, thereby leaving female migrant workers contingent on diplomatic interventions that act as only temporary fixes.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p>Lanka-Qatar Joint Committee e. This joint contingency team should link Qatari and Sri Lankan labour ministries via digital platforms to coordinate emergency relief.</p> <p>This strategy will enable the transition from delayed and reactive rescue efforts to pre-approved, streamlined efforts that guarantee immediate security to migrant women.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| MOU with Bahrain | <p>Initiated in April 2008, this statement of intent aims to support orderly and ethical recruitment practices Facilitating the migration of semi-skilled and high-skilled workers through strengthened cooperation in the occupational training needed to achieve these objectives (Seneviratne et al., 2023).</p> <p>For instance, it requires local agencies to ensure migrants are medically eligible and possess verified skills (SLBFE, n.d.). Obligates Bahraini statutory labour laws to conform and embed universally accepted workplace standards, and to apply these standards to Sri Lankan migrant workers (Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), n.d.).</p> <p>By guaranteeing skills-based hiring and alignment with global labour standards, the MOU provides the basis for more</p> | <p>Because a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is not a legally binding instrument, host countries are not subject to legal penalties and sanctions for breaching terms. This lack of jurisdictional weight is detrimental because it renders labour welfare and evacuation provisions unenforceable during times of tensions in West Asia.</p> <p>This leaves economically vulnerable domestic workers entirely unaided and trapped in a war zone As the MOU exclusively covers only formal and private sector contractual employment, it inadvertently excludes informal domestic workers who constitute most Sri Lankan migrants from its legal obligations for the migrant labour</p> | <p>Upgrade the MOU into a binding Bilateral Labour Agreement that establishes enforceable reciprocal obligations for wage protection, consular access, emergency assistance and repatriation tailored for marginalised groups like low-income domestic women workers during crisis.</p> <p>Set up a joint crisis coordination program between Sri Lanka and Bahrain, as mandated by the BLA with designated expert authorities, and mandatory information sharing. The program will outline predefined procedures for mapping, aiding, and evacuating migrant women during regional insecurities</p> |

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 | equitable employment outcomes for Sri Lankans in Bahrain.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | force.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| MOU with Kuwait | Focused on preserving the labour rights of migrant workers, and offering skills development programs, the MOU was formalised on May 2012(Seneviratne et. Al, 2023).                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Non-binding nature implies it lacks the force of labour laws, like the MOU with Bahrain. As Kuwaiti immigration and labour legislation take precedence over foreign MOUs, Kafala sponsorship arrangements persist. The prevalence of this asymmetrical system allows employers excessive leverage over their worker's mobility, preventing them from reporting abuse or escaping contractual violations (ILO, 2023). | A similar bilateral agreement that extends gender inclusive provisions. Negotiate the BLA to maintain the security of Sri Lankan women employed in private households by explicitly classifying an employer's confiscation of workers' passports as a material breach of the contract A material breach of this nature must mandate automatic contract termination and emergency repatriation. |
| MOU with UAE    | Signed in 2018, the Manpower MOU strives to encourage transparent and accountable contractual obligations between workers, recruitment agents, and the employers abroad, to combat the illegal smuggling of migrants (Embassy of Sri Lanka in the United Arab Emirates, n.d.). Mandates the formal licensing of recruitment agencies and the registration of individual | Despite the existence of designated joint committees to review and enforce MOU provisions (IOM,2022), its operationalisation has been inadequate. These backlogs are due to institutional capacity bottlenecks, fragmented data sharing, and an absence of sustained bilateral commitment                                                                                                                            | Enforce a permanent, jointly staffed Sri Lankan bilateral unit with the UAE, focused on gender-disaggregated reporting to identify specific intersectional vulnerabilities In addition, this unit will conduct quarterly compliance reviews to maintain sustained implementation of MOU                                                                                                        |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                     |              |
|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
|  | <p>employment contracts via official diplomatic channels such as the Sri Lankan embassy or SLBFE (Embassy of Sri Lanka in the United Arab Emirates, n.d.).</p> <p>Allows Sri Lanka considerable oversight over contractual and recruitment arrangements abroad. This is vital to reducing Sri Lanka's migrant workers, especially low-income women from being subject to monetary fraud by sub-agents.</p> | from both partners. | obligations. |
|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|

*Table 1: SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis of International Agreements with the Gulf States*

## 4.0 Sri Lankan Women's Labour Migration to the Gulf: Structural Drivers and Vulnerabilities

To Sri Lanka, the Gulf region represents a particularly preferred destination for migrant women workers due to its relatively lower procedural requirements compared to other major labour markets in Europe or Australia (ILO, 2023). These destinations primarily recruit based on qualifications and for specialised professions. GCC economies continue to exhibit enduring demand for low-skilled care workers, facilitated by established recruitment networks and employer-sponsored visas (Gamburd, 2026). The reduced bureaucratic complexity implies less documentation, therefore lowering the time, cost and unpredictability involved in obtaining and securing overseas work in the region. In fact, as of 2026, around 77% of all daily official departures for foreign employment from Sri Lanka are directed to the Middle East (SLBFE, 2026).

This demonstrates the feasibility of Gulf migration for women as a practical means of escaping their harsh socioeconomic circumstances created by gendered structural barriers (Gamburd, 2010). To develop holistic, evidence-based, gender responsive policymaking, it is vital to unpack the structural barriers at home that cause women to seek employment outside. This enhances the scope to rethink what it takes to guarantee inclusive, decent and appropriate work opportunities for Sri Lankan women seeking migrant employment in the long term.

### 4.1 Why Women Migrate: Gendered Economic and Social Drivers

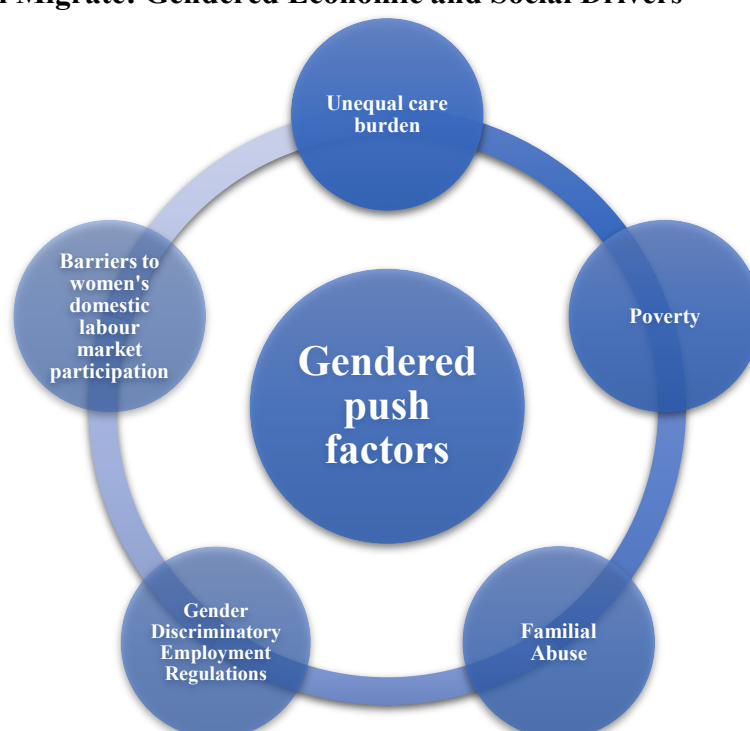


*Figure 1: Authors' Illustration of gendered push factors driving labour migration*

- **Unequal Care Burden**

Gendered labour market exclusion is closely correlated with the inequitable distribution of unpaid homemaking responsibilities on women. In fact, an estimated 3.5 million women engage in unpaid care work, compared with 1.5 million men, underscoring pervasive gender assumptions that relegate women to domesticity and men to

breadwinning (ILO, 2024). This unequal burden is further reinforced by insufficient and costly childcare provision, which disincentivises women from entering, remaining and being retained in domestic workforces (Advocata, 2025). These outcomes are clearly apparent in women's labour force participation rate, which stood at merely 32.3% in Quarter 4 of 2025. (Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), 2026). These gender inequalities create a paradox. While unpaid care duties diminish women's economic participation at home, Gulf labour markets, especially domestic sectors, monetise these feminised skills to generate paid employment opportunities that are readily transferable abroad.

- **Poverty**

Gunaratne finds that financial hardships emerged as a critical driver of substantial labour migration outflows, with 23% of respondents citing their children's educational and medical expenses as the motivations for seeking jobs abroad (Gunaratne, 2023). In this study, many reported "migrating for the...second or third time," as limited access to permanent local occupations left them reliant on seasonal tasks that could not ensure stable household incomes (Gunaratne, 2023). Migrating to Middle Eastern countries, however, guarantees a Sri Lankan domestic migrant labourer to earn an average of USD\$ 160 to USD\$ 300 a month (GCC Domestic, 2026). When converted into Sri Lankan rupees, this amount exceeds the conventional earnings of a woman or her husband across local sectors by around three to fivefold, thus establishing Gulf migration as a strategic pathway for accessing exponentially higher and reliable incomes than those available locally.

- **Familial Abuse**

Abusive family settings can steer women towards migration to the Gulf as a means of escaping chauvinistic hostility at home, while securing greater financial autonomy as breadwinners abroad. In the same study by Gunaratne, around 12.3% of female respondents faced either perpetual bullying by family members or intimate partner violence (Gunaratne, 2023). In fact, job insecurities are often intertwined with marital abuse (DCS, 2020).

- **Gender Discriminatory Employment Regulations**

Antiquated legal restrictions surrounding women's working hours can impede their integration into flexible and high value formal occupations, especially where night shifts are integral to the task. The Maternity Benefits Ordinance No. 32 of 1939 reinforces employers' reluctance to hire women, by forcing them to manage the temporary absence and replacement of female staff during childbirth alongside other financial obligations (ILO, 2025). These additional costs could render female candidates less attractive to employers.

Although the Shop and Office Employees Act of 1954 was amended in 2024 to allow extended hours for women employed in IT and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), it continues to disincentivise overtime work beyond 8 p.m. for females employed across all other major sectors (Daily Mirror, 2026). Although not an outright ban, such restrictions are framed as safeguards against harassment (Ministry of Labour, 2022). The existence of such legislation that restricts women's role in the public sphere renders professional economic alternatives inaccessible to women, drawing them to higher-

paying domestic work opportunities in high demand across the GCC.

#### **4.2 Barriers to Women's Domestic Labour-Market Participation**

High commuting costs can erode already limited wages, rendering urban employment financially unviable for distant, rural women, thus undermining their integration into Sri Lanka's formal labour force. A 2022 national field survey found that hired women spent approximately Rs. 540 per day on transport, with the average time taken to shift from the home to the workplace being about three hours and 20 minutes (Shanthaarchchi, 2023). These economic barriers are compounded by women's concerns about the safety of public transport, with 90% of women in Sri Lanka revealing they had experienced sexual harassment while accessing it (UNFPA, 2017). These cumulative strains on individual income encourage women to look outward, to labour destinations within the GCC where live-in domestic placements enable them to bypass daily transit expenses (Caritas Sri Lanka- Social and Economic Development Centre-SEDEC, 2012).

#### **4.3 Vulnerabilities in Gulf Employment**

Sri Lankan women's overrepresentation in Gulf domestic and care work heightens their exposure to employer exploitation, as such work is often confined to the margins of national labour legislation. Article Seven of Saudi Arabia's labour law excludes domestic workers from the application of its provisions, indicating the legally marginalised nature of such work (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD), n.d.). Despite the existence of the 'Regulation for Domestic Workers and Those in Similar Positions', this separate regulatory framework lacks the comprehensive and robust enforcement mechanisms of the general labour law (MHRSD, 2024). Poor enforcement erodes employer accountability by enabling the violations of domestic migrant workers' rights to go undetected, thus creating conditions conducive to exploitative practices. Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) uncovers that over 80% experienced continuous working hours without rest days, more than three-quarters reported wage underpayment or non-payment, and around two-thirds endured psychological mistreatment (Weeraratne and Gunawardena, 2025). Furthermore, approximately 60% of women displayed signs of physical injury, while five out of 20 reported sexual assault (Weeraratne and Gunawardena, 2025).

The Kafala system, being at the disposal of an employer, can facilitate the withholding of wages, identity cards, passports, and other crucial documentation, compromising their bargaining power, as employers can weaponise migrants' fears of deportation and job loss to impose unfair conditions on them (Amnesty International, 2023). The Kafala/Kafil system is a legal framework deployed across Gulf nations to bind a migrant worker's residency and visa status to one specific employer or sponsor. (Amnesty International, 2023). Withholding these documents also constricts migrants' alternatives for exit and capacity for job switching, potentially enabling exploitative work practices to persist.

Between 2018 and 2020, Qatar repealed the requirement for exit permits and employer-approved "No Objection Certificates" (NOC) to transition to another job (Amnesty International, 2023). Despite these reforms, government data depicts that tens of thousands of migrant workers are being denied employment transfers each year, with inadequate justification. In fact, in the first eight months of 2023, more than a third of workers' job transfer requests were not approved by the Qatari Ministry of Labour (Amnesty International, 2023), significantly constraining migrant workers' mobility.

The lack of clarity surrounding arbitrary refusals and the criteria for the job transfer process diminishes workers' ability to comprehend and contest decisions relating to their employment, thus weakening accountability mechanisms for employers. Such dependency contradicts the gendered rationale for migration, as female workers are particularly susceptible to the absence of adequate safeguards for migrant workers, pushing some towards irregular migration channels. (Amnesty International, 2023). Irregular migration refers to the movement of people across international borders outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and host country. (International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2011).

To bypass these procedures, workers seek out unauthorised private recruitment agencies, which often impose exorbitant recruitment fees that compel them to turn to loans. High-interest loans increase their vulnerability to debt bondage, trapping them in abusive working conditions to repay their loans (Amnesty International, 2023). These inequities become especially apparent during crises, as sponsors often abandon migrants during conflict, trapping them in war zones without safe exit options (International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2016).

## **5.0 How Geopolitical Conflict Amplifies Existing Vulnerabilities**

### **5.1 Employment and Income Insecurity during Conflict**

At present, 73% of Sri Lankan workers registered for foreign employment in 2026 are destined for GCC countries experiencing drone missile strikes and supply chain paralysis that warrants concern (ILO, 2026). This reinforces Sri Lanka's structural dependence on the volatile Gulf migration model, heightening risks of sudden contract terminations that could deplete migrant women's financial prospects. The August 2026 SLBFE stakeholder consultation with the ILO identified diminished working hours, wage theft, delayed contractual renewals, and denied leave and social security benefits as emerging forms of vulnerability (ILO, 2026). The consultation also concluded that the underpaid domestic sector, performed primarily by migrant women, is more acutely affected by wartime disorder. These impacts include employers withdrawing accommodation due to property damage or loss in revenue flows, while environmental destruction may impede safe movement to airports or border crossings for return (ILO, 2026). Moreover, unlike migrants in regulated workplaces, domestic workers' confinement in private households can complicate consular locating, communication, support and safe evacuation during this war.

During KIIs, a senior official from the SLBFE observed that a notable proportion of job-related complaints in recent months pertained to either deferred wage disbursements or the non-payment of wages altogether (SLBFE, 2026). Drone strikes damage transport routes as well as commercial and energy infrastructure, thus suspending business operations while supply chain disruptions can raise operating input costs (RBC Capital Markets, 2026). Such operational instabilities tempt employers into illegally withholding or cutting pay for their domestic staff as a desperate means to absorb their own financial losses (RBC Capital Markets, 2026). Not only does this defeat their gendered rationale for migrating to seek the financial autonomy required to emancipate their dependents at home, but it also exposes their almost non-existent bargaining power. Inconsistent income flows lock them into an even more desperate position against abusive employers, exacerbating the misogyny inherent in global labour systems. As contractual security remains contingent on conditions beyond Sri Lanka's diplomatic influence, the country must reorient its strategic foreign policy to also prioritise alternate destinations, particularly in Europe that demand professional talent. Simultaneously, the local government must build robust domestic opportunities to cultivate sustainable pathways for resilient employment.

## **5.2 Gaps in Crisis Preparedness and Consular Protection**

The ongoing war has exposed critical coordination gaps in Sri Lanka's emergency program architecture. This is rooted in a lack of synchronised action between Sri Lanka's foreign policy and overly localised disaster management agencies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka's emergency contingency planning lacked adequate quarantine facilities for low-income returnees, and the technological resources to track undocumented or irregular migrant workers (Shah, 2022). Although digital infrastructure such as "Contact Sri Lanka" was deployed to reach out to Sri Lankan citizens in Gulf nations, the policy response was ultimately reactive and not proactive (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2023). This meant that it lacked the capacity to accommodate a high density of concurrent queries, hindering its effectiveness.

Although the ILO Emergency Evacuation Response Plan for Sri Lanka was formulated to mitigate the shortfalls of the COVID-19 response (ILO, 2024), the August 2026 ILO-SLBFE consultation revealed that safeguards had not been adequately operationalised in times of geopolitical disasters (ILO, 2026). The consultation urged updated interoperable migrant data, consistent financing, clearly defined institutional responsibilities, and rapid communication backups (ILO, 2026). This reveals lapses in the 2024 roadmap's call for inclusive procedures and digital communication systems (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2023). These gaps in inter-agency coordination are arguably consequential for Sri Lankan women in domestic employment, whose contact and rapid identification by authorities is complicated due to their confinement in private households under sponsorship arrangements. The limited support they receive is a testament to the need for robust pre-designated referral channels tailored for low-income women, and their improved representation in diplomatic engagements between Sri Lanka and the GCC. These mechanisms must be activated before and not after security deteriorates in these regions.

## **5.3 Remittance Dependence and Macroeconomic Vulnerability**

The prevalence of Sri Lankan labour migrants in the Gulf creates a high-stakes reliance on worker remittances, establishing a direct transmission channel through which regional geopolitical volatilities can destabilise Sri Lanka's macroeconomic stability (Perera, 2026). Workers' remittances from the Middle East have constituted over 50% of Sri Lanka's total remittance inflows, reinforcing Sri Lanka's asymmetrical overdependence on it for foreign exchange (Weeraratne, 2026). This overdependence constrains Sri Lanka's crisis diplomacy during this globally polarising and volatile period, compelling the local government to maintain a position of careful neutrality. This calculated balancing act is critical, because any diplomatic realignment risks provoking GCC host nations into potentially freezing work visas or formal banking networks. Such aggressive retaliation on behalf of the GCC will stall vital income flows and, in the process, stall the country's key source of foreign exchange in the process.

During the first half of 2026, cumulative remittance inflows reached US\$ 4.6 billion (CBSL, 2026), an 18.9% rise from US\$ 3.7 billion in the first half of 2025 (CBSL, 2025). Since 2025, the highest proportion of remittances was sent from Kuwait at around 10.7%, the UAE at approximately 10.4%, and Saudi Arabia at 9.4% (Weeraratne, 2026). These increases highlight that the concern is not immediate reductions in remittance inflows, but rather the destabilisation of a critical source of foreign exchange in a region that remains subject to repeated escalations of violence. The Sri Lankan government's inability to accurately anticipate or shape the outcomes of the unprecedented instabilities of the Gulf region underscores its need for diversified remittance-generating destinations to manage this asymmetry.

## **5.4 Involuntary Return and Implications for Reintegration**

The current conflict is a testament to the reality that escalating tensions in West Asia weaponise asymmetric migratory interdependencies, forcing mass involuntary returns that strain national resources and perpetuate its reliance on low-skilled emigration. By 25 March 2026, approximately 200-250 Sri Lankan migrant workers had formally requested repatriation, predominantly from Kuwait, comprising around 178, 28 from Bahrain, and two from the UAE (Ceylon Today, 2026). As over 70% of requests originated from Kuwait, a major hub comprising female domestic workers, abrupt return is likely to have disproportionate gendered consequences. When sudden repatriation diminishes their independent income streams, these women are denied the financial autonomy they earned abroad, as they are re-absorbed into the unpaid domestic labour force due to the absence of diverse livelihood alternatives. This absence risks stratifying Sri Lanka's rigid gender hierarchy that undervalues female breadwinners within the household.

Following escalations in February this year, the local Immigration Department cancelled Middle East-bound flights from Sri Lanka, citing security concerns associated with the conflict in the Middle East (Department of Immigration and Emigration, 2026). Although Middle East-bound services resumed in March, cancellations persisted on some routes, accompanied by frequent surges in flight delays (Sri Lankan Airlines, 2026). For migrant women, such unforeseeable circumstances can complicate their decisions to reach or remain in the destination country, potentially reproducing cycles of low-wage migration when conditions permit. This helplessness, due to scarce alternatives at home, underscores the need for strengthened gender-responsive reintegration embedded within repatriation. This will ensure emergency return becomes an incentive rather than a disruption to their economic participation.

## 6.0 Policy Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the vulnerabilities experienced by Sri Lankan women migrant workers in the Gulf are not created by geopolitical conflict alone. Conflict acts as a multiplier of pre-existing inequalities. The weaknesses identified in Sri Lanka's crisis-response architecture, including fragmented institutional coordination, limited migrant data, inadequate communication mechanisms and insufficiently operationalised evacuation procedures, further compound these vulnerabilities.

Accordingly, Sri Lanka's policy response should move beyond reactive repatriation towards a gender-responsive and anticipatory migration governance framework. This requires action across three interconnected temporal horizons as illustrated below:

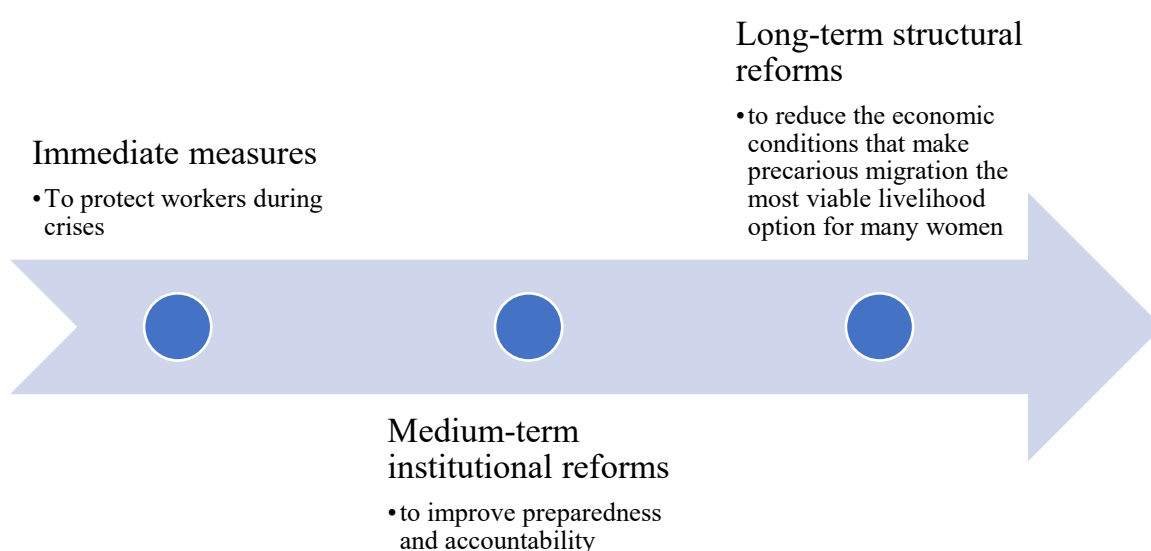


*Figure 2: Authors' Illustration of the immediate, medium-term, and long-term measures*

## 6.1 Immediate Priorities

### 6.1.1. Establish a Gender-Responsive Crisis Early Warning and Response Mechanism

Sri Lanka should establish a permanent, gender-sensitive early warning mechanism to monitor security, employment and humanitarian risks affecting Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf. The system should bring together the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), relevant labour authorities, diplomatic missions, airlines and other relevant actors to generate regular risk assessments and identify workers requiring urgent assistance.

A 24-hour multilingual hotline, supported by SMS, WhatsApp and other accessible communication channels, should operate alongside the early warning system. This is

particularly important for domestic workers who may have limited access to public communication networks or who may be confined to private households. The system should allow workers to report wage withholding, loss of accommodation, abuse, inability to contact employers, and immediate security concerns without requiring physical access to an embassy. This responds directly to the communication and identification gaps exposed by previous crises, where existing mechanisms were largely reactive and struggled to reach vulnerable and irregular workers.

#### **6.1.2. Reform emergency insurance to cover conflict-related employment disruption**

Emergency insurance schemes for migrant workers should be revised to recognise that geopolitical crises can produce harm that falls outside conventional accident or medical insurance. Coverage should include, where appropriate, conflict-related loss of employment, delayed or unpaid wages, loss of employer-provided accommodation, emergency subsistence, evacuation and repatriation costs, and immediate post-return assistance.

Attention should be given to women domestic workers, whose employment and accommodation are frequently tied to the same employer. Insurance mechanisms should therefore be accessible without requiring the worker to remain with an abusive employer or to produce documentation that may be inaccessible during a crisis. The National Policy on Migration and Employment has already recognised the importance of crisis preparedness and insurance mechanisms; the priority should now be to ensure that these measures are operational, accessible and responsive during an emergency.

#### **6.1.3 Ensure Immediate Gender-Responsive Reintegration Support for Crisis Returnees**

Repatriation should not be framed as the endpoint of crisis response. Women who return involuntarily may face an abrupt loss of employment, income and accommodation, while simultaneously assuming unpaid caregiving responsibilities at home. Sudden returns can particularly affect women's economic autonomy, as the absence of viable domestic employment opportunities risks reabsorbing returnees into unpaid domestic labour or insecure local work.

An emergency reintegration package for crisis-affected returnees should be activated alongside repatriation. Women facing heightened risks, including those returning from abusive employment situations or without secure accommodation, should be prioritised for targeted assistance. This should include temporary income assistance, immediate access to psychosocial and protection services, employment matching, recognition of skills acquired overseas, and expedited access to vocational training and livelihood assistance. Reintegration services should also be coordinated between the SLBFE, Ministry of Labour, local authorities and relevant CSOs to ensure that support continues beyond the point of arrival.

### **6.2 Medium Term Priorities**

#### **6.2.1. Establish an integrated, gender-disaggregated migrant data and Communication System**

Sri Lanka should develop a centralised and interoperable migrant worker information system linking the SLBFE, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, overseas missions, immigration authorities and relevant labour institutions. Data should be systematically disaggregated by sex, occupation, destination, age, migration status, location, employer, contract status and other relevant vulnerability indicators, subject to appropriate privacy safeguards.

The system should enable authorities to identify where Sri Lankan women are concentrated and determine which groups require assistance when a crisis emerges. Focus should be given to workers who fall outside formal migration channels. Existing experience demonstrates that undocumented or irregular migrants can become effectively invisible during emergencies because authorities lack reliable information through which to locate them.

### **6.2.2. Create secure alternative registration and communication channels**

The Government should develop flexible digital registration mechanisms that enable Sri Lankan migrant workers to update their employment, location and emergency contact information even after departure from Sri Lanka. Registration should not depend exclusively on formal recruitment channels. A secure system could allow workers to independently register or update their details through a mobile application, web portal, SMS or embassy-supported service. Such mechanisms would improve the State's ability to reach workers during emergencies while reducing the invisibility of women who migrate through irregular or informal pathways. This should be accompanied by strong data-protection safeguards.

### **6.2.3. Establish a Specialised Inter-Agency Migration Crisis Response Unit**

Sri Lanka should establish a permanent Migration Crisis Response Unit with a clearly defined mandate to coordinate responses to overseas emergencies. The Unit should operate across relevant agencies. Its responsibilities should include:

- Maintaining updated contingency plans for major destination countries
- Conducting regular crisis simulations and evacuation exercises
- Coordinating with Sri Lankan diplomatic missions
- Maintaining specialist emergency communication systems
- Identifying evacuation routes and temporary shelters in advance
- Coordinating transportation and repatriation
- Maintaining a referral system for gender-based violence and other protection concerns
- Overseeing post-return reintegration

The need for such a mechanism is particularly evident from the identified gap between the existence of emergency plans and their implementation, which was also pointed out by the August 2026 SLBFE consultation with the ILO.

## **6.3 Long-Term Priorities**

### **6.3.1. Align national skills development with higher-value employment opportunities**

Sri Lanka should progressively shift its labour migration strategy from the export of low-cost labour towards the development and export of higher-skilled and higher-value human capital. The 2012 National Human Resources and Employment Policy should therefore be reviewed to ensure that skills-development programmes respond to both domestic and international labour-market demand. For women, training should extend beyond traditional occupations associated with care and domestic work to areas such as digital services, information technology, healthcare, technical occupations, and other professional sectors with stronger prospects for decent work and social protection. Such diversification would provide women with greater bargaining leverage both domestically and overseas, while reducing the structural dependence on low-skilled Gulf employment identified throughout this brief.

### **6.3.2. Remove gender-based barriers to women's employment**

This includes reducing women's dependence on overseas domestic employment requires addressing the unpaid care economy within Sri Lanka. Care infrastructure should consequently be treated not merely as a social welfare intervention but as an economic policy. Sri Lanka should review legislative and regulatory provisions that unnecessarily restrict women's participation in particular sectors or working arrangements. Restrictions on women's working hours should be examined from an equality and labour-market participation perspective, while workplace safety should be secured through effective employer obligations rather than through restrictions that limit women's employment opportunities. This is particularly important because the brief identifies the interaction between gendered labour-market restrictions, limited domestic opportunities and the attraction of higher-paying domestic employment in the Gulf.

### **6.3.3 Diversify labour and remittance-generating destinations through middle-power diplomacy**

Sri Lanka should pursue a deliberate strategy of labour-market and remittance diversification rather than allowing the Gulf corridor to remain the dominant destination for overseas employment. This requires creating additional pathways into labour markets in Europe, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and other destinations where demand exists for skilled workers. Such diversification should form part of a broader middle-power diplomatic strategy in which Sri Lanka maintains constructive relations with Gulf partners while simultaneously expanding its network of labour and economic partnerships. The economic rationale for diversification is particularly strong given that more than 80% of Sri Lanka's migrant departures are directed towards the Middle East and that remittances remain a major source of foreign exchange.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explores the vulnerabilities of Sri Lankan women migrant workers in the GCC, and broader “Middle East” are not produced by geopolitical instability alone. They are amplified by structural inequalities embedded within Sri Lanka’s labour migration system and the wider Gulf labour market. The study further illustrates that although Sri Lanka has developed a substantial migration governance architecture and bilateral arrangements with Gulf states, these mechanisms remain predominantly reactive and insufficiently equipped to anticipate and manage gender-specific risks during geopolitical crises. Crisis diplomacy must therefore become an integral component of migrant protection, supported by gender-disaggregated data, coordinated early-warning and evacuation mechanisms, accessible consular communication, stronger bilateral crisis provisions and meaningful multilateral cooperation.

However, protection cannot end with evacuation. Crisis-induced return must be accompanied by immediate reintegration and longer-term pathways into decent and sustainable employment. Ultimately, reducing the vulnerability of Sri Lankan women migrant workers requires a shift from viewing migration primarily as a source of remittances towards recognising migrant women as rights-holders and economic actors whose security is intrinsically linked to Sri Lanka’s national resilience. This requires simultaneously enhancing protective measures abroad, ensuring dignified reintegration at home, and expanding women’s access to skills, care infrastructure, employment and finance, while diversifying labour and remittance-generating destinations through strategic middle-power diplomacy. During KIIs experts iterated that, although fiscal constraints due to Sri Lanka’s current economic recovery phase pose an obstacle to these reforms, state obligations to defend human rights of citizens, even those overseas, must remain a non-negotiable priority. Ultimately, resilience means ensuring that women are not obligated to migrate, but rather empowered to choose whether, where, and how they work abroad.

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