

Women in Global Care Chains: India's Economic Diplomacy and the Feminization of Migration

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Abstract

The global expansion of care economies has intensified cross-border labour mobility, particularly among women migrants from developing countries. India has emerged as a significant sending country of women engaged in domestic work, nursing, elder care, and other personal care services across the Gulf region and OECD countries. This paper examines women's participation in global care chains through the interconnected lenses of gender, labour migration, and India's economic diplomacy. Using a review-based methodology and secondary data from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank, UN Women, OECD, and policy documents of the Government of India, the study analyses structural patterns, governance frameworks, and gendered vulnerabilities shaping care work migration. The paper argues that despite the growing importance of care labour in global labour markets, care work migration remains marginal within formal migration governance and foreign policy discourse. While international labour standards and bilateral agreements exist, significant gaps persist between policy intent and effective implementation, particularly in informal and household-based employment sectors. By situating care work within economic diplomacy, the study highlights the need for gender-responsive migration policies, strengthened bilateral labour agreements, and greater integration of the care economy into foreign policy planning. The paper contributes to interdisciplinary debates on migration, labour governance, and gender by emphasizing care work migration as a strategic yet under-recognized dimension of global economic engagement.

Keywords: Global Care Chains, Women Migrant Workers, Care Economy, Economic Diplomacy, Gender and Labour Migration, India.

Introduction

International labour migration has become a structural feature of the contemporary global economy, shaped by demographic ageing, uneven development, labour market segmentation, and the reorganization of welfare and care systems under globalization. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there were an estimated 169 million international migrant workers worldwide in 2019, with women constituting a substantial proportion of this workforce, particularly in service-oriented sectors (ILO, 2021). In recent decades, migration flows have increasingly shifted away from male-dominated industrial employment towards care-related occupations, including domestic work, healthcare, childcare, and elder care—sectors that are essential for sustaining households and economies but remain systematically undervalued.

A defining transformation within global migration patterns is the **feminization of labour migration**, referring not only to the rising numerical participation of women migrants but also to their concentration in gender-segregated and care-intensive forms of work. Women now account for nearly

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*A Special Issue for the papers accepted for publication in the International Multidisciplinary Conference on India's Foreign Policy and International Relations: A Future Roadmap (IFPIR-2026) (Hybrid Mode)(22-24 January 2026) Organized by Geo-Politics & Defence Study Research Cell, Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

half of all international migrants globally, with disproportionately high representation in domestic and care occupations (UN DESA, 2024). This trend is closely associated with the expansion of **global care chains**, a concept that captures the transnational reorganization of care labour whereby women from lower-income countries migrate to meet care deficits in wealthier economies (Hochschild, 2000; Yeates, 2009).

While global care chains have generated income opportunities and remittance flows for sending countries, they have also intensified gendered inequalities within international labour markets. Care work is frequently characterized by informality, weak labour regulation, employer dependency, and limited access to social protection—conditions that are exacerbated for migrant women due to their legal status and occupational location within private households or undervalued service sectors (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2022). As a result, women's care work migration represents a paradoxical process: it expands women's participation in global labour markets while simultaneously reproducing precarity and gendered disadvantage.

The **care economy** has gained increasing recognition in academic and policy discourse as a foundational component of economic and social reproduction. Estimates suggest that paid and unpaid care work accounts for a substantial share of global employment, particularly for women, yet remains marginal in economic accounting and public policy (ILO, 2018). In destination countries, migrant care workers play a crucial role in compensating for ageing populations, shrinking welfare provision, and rising female labour force participation. However, the transnational dimensions of care labour raise critical questions regarding responsibility, regulation, and governance across borders.

India presents a particularly important case for examining these dynamics. As one of the world's largest labour-sending countries, India has traditionally been associated with male-dominated migration flows to the Gulf region. More recently, however, there has been a marked increase in the migration of Indian women for care-related occupations, including domestic work, nursing, and elder care, to both West Asian and OECD countries (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023; World Bank, 2023). Despite this shift, women's care work migration remains weakly integrated into India's migration governance and foreign policy discourse.

India's **economic diplomacy** has increasingly emphasized trade, investment, diaspora engagement, and skilled mobility as instruments of global engagement. Yet, care labour migration—despite its contribution to remittances, labour market integration, and international service provision—has received limited analytical attention within diplomatic and policy frameworks. Existing studies on global care chains and feminized migration have largely examined care work through sociological or gender-focused lenses, with comparatively little engagement with foreign policy and economic diplomacy perspectives, particularly from the standpoint of labour-sending countries in the Global South.

This paper addresses this gap by situating women's care work migration from India within the broader context of global care chains, labour governance, and economic diplomacy. Rather than offering a purely descriptive account, the study critically examines how care migration is governed, regulated, and marginalized within formal policy frameworks, despite its growing economic and social significance. By integrating insights from migration studies, feminist political economy, and international relations, the paper contributes to interdisciplinary debates on gendered labour mobility and global governance.

The paper makes three key contributions to existing literature:

- It advances a **foreign policy-oriented interpretation of global care chains**, highlighting care work migration as an under-recognized dimension of economic diplomacy.
- It offers a **South-origin perspective** by examining India's role as a labour-sending country, addressing a gap in care migration literature that is often dominated by destination-country analyses.
- It provides a **critical governance analysis** of the disconnect between international labour standards, bilateral agreements, and the lived realities of women migrant care workers.

Conceptual Framework: Global Care Chains and Feminized Migration

The conceptual foundation of this paper is grounded in the interrelated ideas of **global care chains**, **feminization of labour migration**, and the **gendered organization of international labour markets**. Together, these concepts help explain why care-related migration has become a defining

feature of contemporary global labour mobility and why women migrants remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and precarious forms of employment.

Definition and Evolution of Global Care Chains

The concept of **Global Care Chains (GCCs)** was first articulated by Hochschild (2000) to describe a series of personal links between people across the world based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. These chains are formed when care responsibilities are transferred from women in wealthier countries to migrant women from poorer regions, who in turn may delegate their own care responsibilities to other women within their households or communities. Over time, the concept has evolved from a sociological explanation of emotional and domestic labour to a broader analytical framework encompassing paid care work, labour migration, and global inequalities (Yeates, 2009).

Global care chains are deeply embedded in the political economy of globalization. Rising female labour force participation in developed economies, ageing populations, shrinking welfare states, and the commodification of care services have intensified the demand for migrant care workers (ILO, 2018). As a result, care labour has become transnationalized, creating hierarchical chains structured by gender, class, nationality, and ethnicity. These chains illustrate how global inequalities are reproduced through the unequal distribution of care responsibilities and labour across borders.

Feminization of Labour Migration: Global Trends

The **feminization of labour migration** refers to the increasing participation of women as autonomous migrants seeking employment rather than migrating solely as dependents or family members. According to the United Nations, women constitute nearly half of the world's international migrant population, with particularly high representation in service-oriented sectors (UN DESA, 2024). This shift reflects structural changes in both sending and receiving countries, including labour market segmentation, declining agricultural employment, and growing demand for low-cost care services (Kofman et al., 2014).

Women migrants are disproportionately employed in domestic work, healthcare, childcare, and elder care—sectors that are socially constructed as extensions of women's "natural" caregiving roles (UN Women, 2022). While migration offers income opportunities and economic empowerment for women, it also reinforces gendered occupational segregation and exposes migrant women to heightened risks of exploitation, abuse, and exclusion from labour protections. Feminized migration thus represents a paradox wherein women's economic participation expands, but often under highly unequal and insecure conditions (ILO, 2021).

Gendered Division of Labour in International Markets

International labour markets are structured along **gendered lines**, with women and men channelled into distinct occupations based on socially constructed norms regarding skills, suitability, and productivity. Feminist political economy scholars argue that care work is systematically undervalued because it is associated with femininity, emotional labour, and domesticity rather than with formal economic production (Razavi, 2007). This gendered division of labour extends across national borders, reinforcing global hierarchies in which women from developing countries occupy the lowest rungs of the international labour market.

In destination countries, migrant women are frequently employed in "3D jobs"—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning—particularly within the care sector (ILO, 2018). Their labour is essential to sustaining households, healthcare systems, and service economies, yet remains largely invisible in economic accounting and policy discourse. The gendered segmentation of global labour markets thus perpetuates inequalities not only between men and women but also between migrant and native workers, and between countries of origin and destination.

Link between Care Work, Informality, and Migration

Care work migration is closely associated with **informal employment arrangements**, characterized by the absence of written contracts, social security, regulated working hours, and legal protection. The ILO estimates that a significant proportion of domestic and care workers globally are employed informally, with migrant women constituting the most vulnerable group (ILO, 2021). Migration status often exacerbates informality, as restrictive immigration regimes, tied visas, and lack of labour inspection mechanisms limit workers' bargaining power.

The intersection of care work, informality, and migration creates a cycle of vulnerability in which women migrants face overlapping forms of disadvantage based on gender, nationality, and legal status (Piper, 2008). This linkage highlights the need to conceptualize care work migration not merely as a labour market phenomenon, but as a governance challenge requiring coordinated responses across labour policy, migration management, and foreign relations. Understanding this intersection is essential for framing gender-responsive and rights-based approaches to international labour mobility.

Review of Literature

• **Global Care Chains: Conceptual Debates and Analytical Limits**

The concept of global care chains (GCCs) has been central to understanding the transnational organization of care labour under globalization. Introduced by Hochschild (2000), the framework conceptualizes care as a series of personal links connecting women across borders through paid and unpaid labour. Subsequent scholars expanded the concept to emphasize structural inequalities between sending and receiving countries, highlighting how global economic disparities shape the redistribution of care responsibilities (Yeates, 2009; Parreñas, 2015).

While widely adopted, the GCC framework has been subject to critical debate. One strand of scholarship argues that GCCs risk portraying women migrant workers primarily as victims of global inequality, underplaying their agency, negotiation strategies, and economic aspirations (Constable, 2007; Raghuram, 2012). Others contend that early GCC literature insufficiently addressed state institutions and labour market regulations, focusing instead on interpersonal and household-level dynamics (Mahon & Robinson, 2011). These critiques call for integrating GCC analysis with political economy and governance perspectives, particularly in relation to migration policy and labour standards.

More recent contributions attempt to address these limitations by situating care chains within broader systems of global labour governance and welfare restructuring (Rai et al., 2014; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015). However, despite this evolution, the role of sending states and their foreign policy strategies remains under-theorized. This gap is particularly evident in analyses of South Asian labour-sending countries, where care migration is often treated as a social issue rather than a diplomatic or economic concern.

• **Feminization of Labour Migration: Structural Change or Persistent Segmentation?**

The feminization of labour migration has generated substantial debate regarding whether increasing female migration represents a transformative shift in global labour markets or a reconfiguration of existing gender hierarchies. Quantitative studies document the growing numerical participation of women in international migration, particularly in service and care sectors (UN DESA, 2024; ILO, 2021). From this perspective, feminization is seen as an outcome of rising demand for reproductive labour in ageing and dual-earner societies in the Global North.

However, feminist labour scholars caution against equating numerical increase with empowerment. They argue that women's migration is disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, informal, and socially devalued occupations, reinforcing occupational segregation rather than dismantling it (Kofman, 2014; Anderson, 2010). Care work migration, in particular, exemplifies what Standing (2011) describes as the feminization of precarity—where women's labour market inclusion is accompanied by heightened insecurity and limited rights.

A further debate concerns the extent to which migration enhances women's autonomy. Some studies highlight gains in income, bargaining power, and social mobility for migrant women and their families (Parreñas, 2015). Others emphasize the persistence of transnational inequalities, including emotional costs, family separation, and the externalization of care deficits to other marginalized women in sending countries (Yeates, 2009; Rai et al., 2014). This tension underscores the need for analytical frameworks that capture both empowerment and exploitation within care migration processes.

• **Women's Care Migration from India: Emerging Patterns and Policy Blind Spots**

Literature on Indian labour migration has traditionally focused on male-dominated flows to the Gulf region, emphasizing remittances, employment cycles, and macroeconomic impacts (Rajan & Saxena, 2019). In contrast, research on Indian women's migration for care work remains relatively limited and fragmented. Existing studies indicate a gradual increase in women's migration to both West Asian countries and OECD nations, particularly in domestic work and nursing (Agrawal & Sangita, 2018; MEA, 2023).

Scholars highlight that Indian women's care migration is shaped by intersecting factors, including caste, class, education, and regional labour markets (Raghuram, 2012). While nursing migration to OECD countries is often more regulated and professionalized, domestic and elder care work in the Gulf frequently occurs within highly informal and restrictive employment regimes (ILO, 2018). This differentiation complicates generalized narratives of care migration and underscores the need for sector-specific analysis.

A key debate in the Indian context concerns the effectiveness of state-led protective measures. Gender-specific migration restrictions have been critiqued for reinforcing paternalistic assumptions while failing to address structural vulnerabilities in destination labour markets (Agrawal & Sangita, 2018). Scholars argue that such measures often displace rather than reduce risk, pushing women into irregular migration channels and undermining diplomatic accountability.

- **Gendered Vulnerabilities, Informality, and Labour Governance**

The vulnerability of migrant care workers has been widely documented in the literature, particularly in relation to informality, lack of social protection, and weak enforcement of labour standards (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2022). Domestic and care work is frequently excluded from labour laws or inadequately regulated, especially when performed within private households. This exclusion has been described as a structural feature of global labour governance rather than an accidental oversight (Anderson, 2010).

Debates within this literature focus on whether international labour standards are sufficient to address these vulnerabilities. While conventions such as ILO Convention No. 189 represent normative progress, scholars question their effectiveness in contexts where enforcement mechanisms are weak and bilateral agreements lack gender-sensitive provisions (Blackett, 2019). Critics argue that global governance frameworks often prioritize formal employment models that do not align with the realities of care work migration.

Recent scholarship calls for rethinking labour governance through a feminist lens that recognizes care as both economic and social infrastructure (Rai et al., 2014). Such approaches emphasize the need for coordinated governance across sending and receiving countries, integrating labour standards, migration policy, and diplomatic engagement.

- **Positioning the Present Study**

This paper builds on these debates by bridging three strands of literature that are often examined separately: global care chains, feminized labour migration, and economic diplomacy. While existing studies provide valuable insights into the lived experiences and structural vulnerabilities of migrant care workers, they pay limited attention to how state-led foreign policy frameworks shape care migration governance.

By focusing on India as a labour-sending country and situating care work migration within economic diplomacy, the study responds to calls for more politically grounded and policy-oriented analyses of global care chains. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on gendered labour mobility by foregrounding governance gaps and reinterpreting care migration as a strategic yet neglected component of international economic engagement.

- **Limitations and Scope of the Study**

This study is subject to certain limitations inherent in its review-based design. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from international organizations, government reports, and published literature, which may not fully capture the lived experiences and informal coping strategies of women migrant care workers across different migration corridors. In addition, variations in data availability, definitions of care work, and gender-disaggregated reporting across countries constrain direct comparability. The study does not undertake primary empirical investigation or causal analysis, and therefore its findings should be interpreted as analytically indicative rather than statistically generalizable. Nonetheless, the scope of the paper lies in synthesizing dispersed evidence across disciplines to offer a governance- and diplomacy-oriented perspective on care work migration. By situating women's care migration within the framework of economic diplomacy and global labour governance, the study provides a conceptual and policy-relevant foundation for future empirical research, comparative case studies, and mixed-method analyses.

Data Sources and Methodology

• Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, review-based research design, combining thematic literature analysis with critical policy review. Given the transnational and multi-scalar nature of care work migration, a review-based approach is particularly appropriate for synthesizing fragmented evidence across disciplines, regions, and institutional domains (Grant & Booth, 2009). The paper does not involve primary data collection; instead, it systematically analyses secondary sources to identify patterns, governance gaps, and policy implications related to women's participation in global care chains.

The study is analytical rather than purely descriptive, with an explicit focus on interpreting existing evidence through the conceptual lenses of gender, informality, and economic diplomacy.

• Data Sources

The analysis draws on a purposive selection of authoritative international and national secondary sources, chosen based on relevance, credibility, and consistency in reporting gender-disaggregated migration and labour data. Sources were reviewed for the period 2000–2024, reflecting the emergence and consolidation of global care chain scholarship and policy attention to the care economy.

International Sources

- International Labour Organization (ILO): Reports on care work, migrant workers, informality, and labour standards, including *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* and *Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers* (ILO, 2018, 2021).
- World Bank: Migration and labour market analyses, particularly *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies* (World Bank, 2023).
- UN Women: Gender-focused studies on migrant women, care economy, and labour rights (UN Women, 2022).
- OECD: Comparative data on international migration, care sector employment, and skill mobility in developed economies (OECD, 2022).
- International Organization for Migration (IOM): Global migration trend reports and thematic briefs (IOM, 2020).
- National Sources (India)
- Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India: Annual reports and policy documents related to overseas employment, diaspora engagement, and bilateral labour agreements (MEA, 2023).
- Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India: Policy frameworks and reports on labour migration, skill development, and worker protection mechanisms (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2021).

Method of Analysis

The study employs three complementary qualitative methods:

• Thematic Literature Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring analytical categories across academic literature and institutional reports, including feminization of migration, global care chains, informality, labour regulation, and gendered vulnerability. This method facilitates systematic interpretation of qualitative material and is widely used in interdisciplinary review studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

• Policy Document Review

Key international conventions, bilateral labour agreements, and national policy documents were examined to assess how women migrant care workers are addressed within migration governance and economic diplomacy frameworks. This approach enables critical comparison between policy intent and implementation outcomes (Walt et al., 2008).

• Comparative Analytical Discussion

The analysis situates India-specific migration patterns within broader global trends by comparing destination regions (Gulf countries and OECD economies), employment forms (formal vs informal), and governance mechanisms. This comparative discussion allows for contextualization of India's experience within global labour mobility dynamics (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

- **Ethical Considerations**

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data and published literature, no direct ethical risks involving human subjects arise. All sources have been appropriately cited to ensure academic transparency and integrity.

India's Economic Diplomacy and Care Work Migration: A Gendered Political Economy Perspective

- **Conceptualizing Economic Diplomacy in the Context of Labour Migration**

Economic diplomacy is commonly understood as the use of diplomatic tools and foreign policy instruments to advance a country's economic interests in the international system, including trade promotion, investment facilitation, and labour mobility (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). Within migration studies, economic diplomacy has traditionally prioritized high-skilled mobility, remittance optimization, and diaspora engagement, often overlooking sectors characterized by low wages, informality, and gendered labour relations. This selective focus reflects underlying hierarchies within global labour markets, where certain forms of labour are framed as economically strategic while others—particularly care work—remain marginalized despite their essential role in sustaining economies and social reproduction.

From a gendered political economy perspective, care work migration represents a critical yet under-theorized dimension of economic diplomacy. Feminist scholars argue that economic diplomacy frameworks often reproduce gender-blind assumptions by privileging market-oriented, monetized forms of labour while neglecting socially reproductive work that underpins productive economies (Elson, 1995; Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014). Care work, although increasingly commodified through international migration, continues to be treated as an extension of women's "natural" roles rather than as skilled labour requiring diplomatic protection and policy coordination.

This paper conceptualizes India's economic diplomacy as a multi-scalar governance process that shapes labour mobility through bilateral agreements, institutional mechanisms, and diplomatic practices abroad. Within this framework, care work migration is examined not merely as a labour supply issue but as a site where gender norms, labour market segmentation, and foreign policy priorities intersect.

- **India's Overseas Employment Framework and Gendered Labour Mobility**

India's overseas employment framework has historically evolved in response to large-scale male migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly in construction, manufacturing, and low-skilled services. Regulatory mechanisms such as the Emigration Act, 1983, and the establishment of institutional bodies like the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE) reflect a risk-management approach focused on contract-based employment and employer accountability (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023).

However, this framework has been less responsive to the distinct conditions faced by women migrant workers, especially those employed in domestic and care work. Although women constitute a growing share of India's overseas workforce in nursing, domestic work, and elder care, their migration pathways are often mediated through informal recruitment networks, private agents, and household-based employment arrangements that fall outside conventional regulatory oversight (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2022).

Gender-differentiated migration restrictions—such as age limits, country-specific bans, and conditional clearances—have been periodically introduced with the stated aim of protecting women workers. Yet, empirical evidence suggests that such restrictions often lead to unintended consequences, including irregular migration and heightened vulnerability, rather than enhanced protection (Agrawal & Sangita, 2018). From an economic diplomacy standpoint, these measures reveal a tension between paternalistic protectionism and the absence of proactive strategies to formalize and safeguard women's care work migration.

- **Bilateral Labour Agreements and the Governance of Care Migration**

Bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) constitute a key instrument of India's labour diplomacy. These agreements are designed to regulate recruitment processes, standardize employment contracts, and facilitate dispute resolution mechanisms between

sending and receiving countries (ILO, 2021). While India has entered into multiple BLAs with Gulf and Asian countries, care work is often weakly specified or subsumed under generic labour categories.

A critical limitation of existing agreements is their gender-neutral framing, which fails to account for the structural vulnerabilities associated with domestic and care work. Feminist migration scholars emphasize that gender-neutral labour governance often obscures power asymmetries rooted in private household employment, live-in work arrangements, and employer control over mobility (Anderson, 2010). Consequently, women care workers remain inadequately protected despite formal diplomatic agreements.

In OECD destination countries, particularly in Europe and East Asia, care migration is increasingly institutionalized through visa regimes linked to ageing populations and labour shortages in health and elder care sectors. However, Indian care workers' access to these pathways remains limited by skill recognition barriers, fragmented certification systems, and the absence of coordinated state-led migration strategies (OECD, 2022). This contrasts sharply with India's proactive diplomatic engagement in skilled IT and professional mobility, highlighting the uneven prioritization of labour categories within economic diplomacy.

- **Role of Indian Missions Abroad: Between Welfare and Diplomacy**

Indian diplomatic missions play a crucial role in implementing labour governance at the destination level, providing consular assistance, grievance redressal, and welfare support to migrant workers. Initiatives such as the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) and Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendras reflect a growing recognition of migrant welfare as a diplomatic concern (MEA, 2023).

However, the capacity of missions to address the specific needs of women care workers is constrained by resource limitations, legal jurisdiction, and the private nature of domestic employment. Care workers employed within households are often isolated from formal labour markets and community networks, making them less visible within institutional support systems (ILO, 2018). As a result, diplomatic engagement tends to be reactive—focused on crisis intervention—rather than preventive or structural.

From a theoretical perspective, this reflects what scholars describe as a “welfare-diplomacy gap”, wherein states acknowledge migrant welfare rhetorically but lack the institutional mechanisms to integrate gendered labour protection into foreign policy practice (Ruhs, 2013). Addressing this gap requires reimagining diplomatic roles beyond crisis management towards proactive labour standard enforcement and bilateral accountability.

- **Care Work Migration as an Under-Recognized Dimension of Economic Diplomacy**

Despite its contribution to remittance inflows, employment generation, and international service provision, care work migration remains marginal within India's economic diplomacy discourse. Remittances from overseas workers have consistently supported India's external balance and household livelihoods, yet the gendered composition of these flows and the labour conditions underpinning them receive limited policy attention (World Bank, 2023).

By treating care work migration as peripheral, economic diplomacy frameworks risk reinforcing the invisibility of feminized labour within global economic governance. Feminist political economy scholars argue that such invisibility is not accidental but reflects deeply embedded hierarchies that privilege productive over reproductive labour within policy paradigms (Rai et al., 2014).

Integrating care work migration into economic diplomacy requires a conceptual shift: recognizing care labour as both an economic asset and a governance responsibility. This entails aligning labour agreements, skill certification systems, and diplomatic practices with international labour standards and gender-responsive migration policies.

- **Gaps in Gender-Sensitive Migration Governance**

The analysis reveals several governance gaps at the intersection of economic diplomacy and care migration. First, the absence of standardized international frameworks for regulating domestic and care work limits the effectiveness of bilateral agreements. Second, the lack of gender-disaggregated data and policy monitoring undermines evidence-based diplomacy. Third, the disconnect between migration governance and foreign policy planning perpetuates the marginalization of women care workers.

Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond protective restrictions towards transformative governance, which emphasizes formalization, skill recognition, and rights-based diplomacy. Such an approach aligns with emerging global debates on ethical recruitment, decent work, and sustainable labour mobility (ILO, 2021).

- **Global Governance, Labour Standards, and Policy Challenges**

Global governance frameworks play a critical role in shaping the rights, protections, and working conditions of migrant workers. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks varies significantly across sectors, and their limitations are particularly pronounced in care work—an area characterized by informality, privatized employment relations, and weak regulatory oversight. This section critically examines international labour standards, governance mechanisms, and implementation gaps, with specific attention to the structural challenges faced by women migrant care workers.

- **International Labour Standards and the Role of the ILO**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) constitutes the cornerstone of global labour governance through its conventions, recommendations, and supervisory mechanisms. Several ILO instruments are directly relevant to women migrant care workers, most notably the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and Recommendation No. 201, which establish minimum standards for fair employment, working hours, social security, and protection from abuse in domestic work (ILO, 2011). Given that domestic and care work is overwhelmingly feminized and migrant-dependent, Convention No. 189 represents a significant normative advancement in recognizing care labour as “real work” deserving of legal protection.

In addition, the Migration for Employment Convention (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention (No. 143) articulate principles of equality of treatment, ethical recruitment, and protection against abusive conditions (ILO, 1975). Together, these instruments provide a comprehensive normative framework for governing labour migration. However, their practical impact remains uneven. Many major labour-receiving countries—particularly those with high reliance on migrant domestic workers—have not ratified Convention No. 189, limiting its enforceability and reach (ILO, 2018). As a result, global labour standards often function more as aspirational benchmarks than as binding protections for women migrant care workers.

- **International Labour Governance Beyond Conventions**

Beyond formal conventions, global labour governance operates through a complex architecture of multilateral institutions, bilateral agreements, and soft-law instruments. Organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Women, and the OECD contribute to policy coordination, data generation, and normative guidance on migration and labour standards (OECD, 2022; UN Women, 2022). These institutions increasingly emphasize ethical recruitment, gender-responsive migration governance, and the portability of social security benefits for migrant workers.

A key development in this landscape is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) adopted by the United Nations in 2018. The GCM explicitly recognizes the gendered dimensions of migration and calls for targeted measures to address the vulnerabilities of women migrant workers, including those in domestic and care work (United Nations, 2018). However, the Compact's non-binding nature limits compliance, and its implementation depends largely on national political will. Consequently, while global governance frameworks acknowledge gendered risks in care work migration, they lack robust enforcement mechanisms capable of addressing sector-specific vulnerabilities.

- **Policy–Implementation Gaps in Care Work Migration**

A central challenge in global labour governance lies in the persistent gap between policy commitments and implementation outcomes. Care work migration exemplifies this disconnect. Despite the existence of international standards, care work often remains excluded from national labour laws or subjected to weaker protections compared to other sectors (ILO, 2018). The private household setting, where much care work occurs, restricts labour inspections and weakens state oversight, rendering formal protections difficult to enforce.

Migration regimes further compound these challenges. Employer-tied visa systems, restrictive mobility provisions, and limited access to legal remedies reduce migrant workers' bargaining power and deter reporting of abuse (ILO, 2021). Even in contexts where legal protections exist, fear of deportation, job loss, or retaliation often prevents women migrant care workers from accessing justice. These

structural constraints highlight that governance failures are not merely administrative but are embedded in the organization of global labour markets and migration systems.

- **Gendered Challenges in Protecting Women Migrant Care Workers**

Women migrant care workers experience intersecting forms of vulnerability shaped by gender, migration status, and employment conditions. Empirical evidence consistently documents long working hours, wage theft, lack of rest days, occupational segregation, and exposure to physical and psychological abuse—particularly in domestic work settings (UN Women, 2022; ILO, 2021). These risks are intensified in informal and household-based employment, where workers remain largely invisible to regulatory authorities.

Human rights organizations have further documented instances of forced labour and trafficking within domestic and care sectors, underscoring systemic governance failures rather than isolated violations (ILO, 2022). Importantly, protection-oriented policies adopted by sending countries—such as bans on women's migration or age-based restrictions—have often produced unintended consequences by pushing women into irregular migration channels, thereby increasing rather than reducing vulnerability (Piper, 2008). This evidence suggests that restrictive controls are insufficient substitutes for rights-based, gender-responsive governance.

- **Reframing Global Governance for Care Work Migration**

Taken together, the analysis reveals that global labour governance frameworks remain ill-equipped to address the specificities of care work migration. While international standards formally recognize care labour, their effectiveness is undermined by weak ratification, limited enforcement, and governance models that prioritize state sovereignty and labour market flexibility over worker protection. For women migrant care workers, protection gaps are most pronounced at the intersection of informality, migration control, and gendered labour segmentation.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from symbolic inclusion of care work within global governance frameworks to substantive integration of gender-responsive enforcement mechanisms. Strengthening cross-border cooperation, enhancing monitoring of bilateral labour agreements, and embedding care work protections within migration regimes are critical steps toward aligning global labour standards with the lived realities of women migrant workers.

- **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

The preceding analysis underscores that women's care work migration occupies a critical yet under-recognized position within global labour markets and India's economic diplomacy. Addressing the structural vulnerabilities faced by women migrant care workers requires coordinated policy interventions at national, bilateral, and multilateral levels. This section outlines key policy implications and recommendations for strengthening gender-responsive migration governance.

- **Need for Gender-Responsive Migration Policies**

A central policy implication is the urgent need to mainstream gender perspectives within migration governance frameworks. Existing migration policies often adopt a gender-neutral approach that fails to account for the specific risks and labour market segmentation experienced by women in care-related occupations. International organizations emphasize that gender-responsive migration policies should address recruitment practices, working conditions, access to social protection, and grievance redressal mechanisms tailored to women migrants' realities (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2022).

Sending countries such as India should move beyond restrictive measures—such as migration bans or age-based eligibility criteria—that have historically been used to “protect” women but have often led to increased irregular migration. Instead, policy frameworks should prioritize rights-based approaches that enhance women's agency, safety, and access to legal employment pathways (Piper, 2008).

- **Strengthening Bilateral Labour Agreements**

Bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) represent a strategic tool for embedding labour protections within international migration flows. Strengthening BLAs to include explicit gender-sensitive provisions—such as standardized contracts for domestic and care workers, minimum wage guarantees, dispute resolution mechanisms, and access to consular support—can significantly improve working conditions for women migrants (ILO, 2021).

India's economic diplomacy can leverage BLAs not only to facilitate labour mobility but also to negotiate better protections for care workers in destination countries, particularly in regions where domestic work remains weakly regulated. Comparative studies suggest that BLAs incorporating enforceable labour standards and monitoring mechanisms are more effective than informal arrangements in safeguarding migrant workers' rights (OECD, 2022).

- **Skill Certification and Pre-Departure Training**

Enhancing skill certification and pre-departure training for women migrant care workers is essential for improving their labour market outcomes and bargaining power. Formal recognition of care skills—particularly in nursing, elder care, and childcare—can facilitate access to regulated employment channels and higher wages, especially in OECD countries with structured health and care systems (World Bank, 2023).

Pre-departure orientation programmes should be expanded to include training on labour rights, contract terms, financial literacy, language skills, and access to grievance mechanisms. Evidence suggests that well-designed pre-departure interventions contribute to safer migration experiences and reduce vulnerability to exploitation (ILO, 2018; IOM, 2020).

- **Role of Diplomacy in Safeguarding Women Workers**

Diplomatic engagement plays a vital role in protecting women migrant workers abroad. Indian missions can move from reactive welfare responses to proactive labour diplomacy, including outreach programmes for care workers, collaboration with civil society organizations, and regular engagement with host-country authorities on labour standards enforcement (MEA, 2023).

Strengthening the capacity of diplomatic missions to address gender-based violence, workplace abuse, and legal disputes involving women care workers is crucial. Integrating labour attachés and gender specialists within missions can enhance institutional responsiveness and align consular practices with global commitments to decent work and human rights (UN Women, 2022).

- **Integration of Care Economy into Foreign Policy Planning**

Finally, the care economy must be explicitly recognized as a strategic component of foreign policy and economic diplomacy. Despite its significant contribution to global labour markets and remittance flows, care work remains largely invisible in trade negotiations, skill mobility frameworks, and development partnerships. Integrating care labour into foreign policy planning can enable more coherent engagement with destination countries, particularly those facing demographic ageing and care deficits (ILO, 2018; OECD, 2022).

Recognizing care work migration as an integral part of India's global economic engagement would also align foreign policy objectives with broader goals of inclusive development, gender equality, and social justice. Such integration requires coordinated policymaking across labour, migration, health, and external affairs institutions.

Conclusion

This paper examined women's participation in global care chains through the lens of labour migration, gendered labour markets, and India's economic diplomacy. Drawing on secondary data and existing literature, the study highlighted how the feminization of migration has intensified the global demand for care labour, with women migrant workers—particularly from developing countries such as India—playing a critical role in sustaining care economies in both developed and middle-income nations. The review demonstrated that care work migration is shaped by structural inequalities, characterized by informality, limited social protection, wage disparities, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2022).

The findings further revealed that while India has developed an extensive overseas employment framework and engages actively in bilateral labour agreements, women's care work migration remains marginal within formal policy and diplomatic narratives. Economic diplomacy has largely prioritized high-skilled mobility and remittance generation, overlooking the care economy despite its growing contribution to global labour markets and household livelihoods (World Bank, 2023). The analysis of global governance mechanisms underscored the existence of robust international labour standards, particularly through ILO conventions, but also exposed persistent gaps between policy intent and effective implementation on the ground.

By situating care work migration within the domains of gender studies, labour economics, and foreign policy analysis, this paper contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of migration governance. It advances the argument that care labour should be recognized as a strategic component of economic diplomacy and global engagement, rather than as a peripheral or informal phenomenon. Integrating gender-responsive approaches into migration governance not only strengthens labour protection but also aligns foreign policy with international commitments to decent work, human rights, and inclusive development (ILO, 2021; OECD, 2022).

The study also identifies several avenues for future research. Empirical studies using gender-disaggregated data could further explore the lived experiences of women migrant care workers across different migration corridors. Comparative analyses of bilateral labour agreements may help assess the effectiveness of gender-sensitive provisions in improving labour outcomes. Additionally, future research could examine the implications of emerging trends—such as digital platforms in care work and demographic ageing—for women's labour migration and foreign policy planning. Such research would deepen understanding of the evolving care economy and support evidence-based policymaking in an increasingly interconnected global labour market.

Table and Figure: Empirical Illustration of Care Work Migration

Table 1: Major Destination Countries and Care Work Sectors for Indian Women Migrant Workers

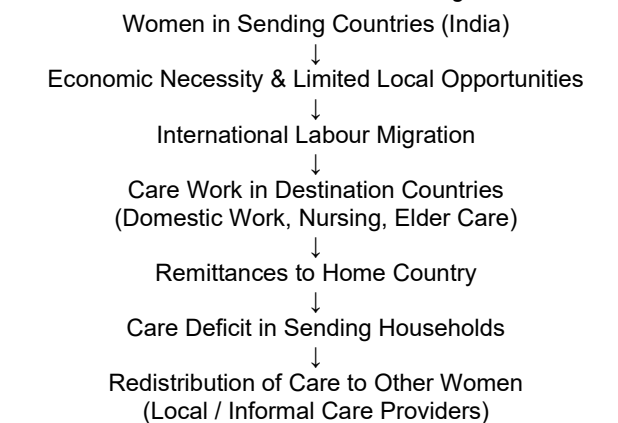
Destination Country	Major Care Work Sectors	Nature of Employment	Key Sources
United Arab Emirates	Domestic work, elder care	Predominantly informal, employer-tied	ILO (2018); MEA (2023)
Saudi Arabia	Domestic work, home-based care	Informal, limited labour protections	ILO (2021); UN Women (2022)
Kuwait	Domestic and personal care services	Informal, household-based	IOM (2020)
Qatar	Domestic work, care services	Semi-formal, contract-based	ILO (2018)
United Kingdom	Nursing, health and social care	Formal, regulated sector	OECD (2022); World Bank (2023)
Canada	Healthcare assistants, elder care	Formal, skill-based migration	OECD (2022)
Australia	Nursing and aged care services	Formal, credential-based	OECD (2022)

Source: Compiled by the author based on ILO (2018, 2021), IOM (2020), MEA (2023), OECD (2022), and World Bank (2023).

Interpretation: The table illustrates the dual nature of women's care work migration from India. While OECD countries absorb formally trained care professionals through regulated migration pathways, Gulf countries continue to rely heavily on informal and household-based care labour. This divergence has significant implications for labour protection, wages, and access to social security.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Global Care Chains

Title: *Conceptual Model of Global Care Chains and Feminized Migration*



Source: Adapted from Hochschild (2000), Yeates (2009), and ILO (2018).

Explanation: This conceptual model captures the cyclical and transnational nature of global care chains. Women from sending countries migrate to provide paid care in destination countries, generating remittances that support households but simultaneously create care deficits in their own families. These deficits are often addressed through unpaid or low-paid care performed by other women, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and global inequalities in care provision.

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