



Migrating families by state design: A matter of public safety?

State intervention in movements of migrant workers and family members through policy and perceptions of violence

What are the political gains and social consequences of government involvement in the migratory movements of family members?

In the mid-1800s, the British colonial government, immersed in its (civilizing) capitalist project, began to actively shape the migration of Indian indentured workers' families to Mauritius. The impetus for this action was not their value as labourers, but the volatile behaviour of the male population due to "disputes over women".¹ The UK - with high immigration in political focus - embarked on an increasingly restrictive course, revoking the right of entry to Commonwealth members i.e. nationals of former colonies in 1962, causing an influx of family members rather than the exit of migrant workers.² Meanwhile, despite laws to ensure the contrary, the situation of some migrant workers (the majority from South/Southeast Asia) in the UAE has been characterized as 'bonded labour' due to the imposition of debt and limited rights, as well as strict (and punitive) measures controlling 'uprising' and maintaining the workers' isolation.³ Why?

Man without family = security risk?

From indentured labourers to guest workers, the migrant workers present a challenge to states who often want these people to leave rather than stay, but remain productive in the meantime. Family reunification is regarded in many countries as good immigration policy because of its positive correlations to integration and stability. *Women* are valuable in their role as wives/partners and mothers; programs address female partners in this role as caregiver and peacemaker. On the other hand, some countries (ex. Germany) faced with many single, male migrants restrict family reunification to the extreme while voicing concern over misogynistic behaviour or propensity for violence by the same. In other words, a dangerous "**other**" is presented from whom "*our*" women should be protected, while the "*other*" women need no protection (if they are even considered), and "*our*" abuse perpetrators and survivors recede into the background: a culturalized public/private divide.



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I propose that the state intervenes in the making and definition of marriage, family and the relationships therein when it exerts influence on migration decisions. Assessing public safety in terms of stability, unrest or belligerent behaviour of males can be rendered harmless with the physical presence and emotional work of a *particular* female partner. And yet, the reliability of the woman as a docile and manageable partner in producing the kind of migrant the state wants is not guaranteed. Following migrant labourer destinations from British colonial Mauritius, to the (postwar) UK/Canada and the contemporary UAE, I intend to examine state interventions (policy/law) and arguments as well as the family and marriage concepts they engage, and their social consequences using critical discourse and content analysis. What policies are enacted, when, and how are they communicated to the public? How are they then received? And can the findings shed light on the ambivalent position of states toward gender-based violence, depending on location and identity?

1. Marina Carter and V. Govinden, "The Recreation of Tradition: Marriage and the Family under Indenture," in *Across the Kalapani. The Bihari Presence in Mauritius*, ed. Marina Carter (London: CRIOS, 2000), 88.

2. Parveen Akhtar, "'We were Muslims but we didn't know Islam': Migration, Pakistani Muslim women and changing religious practices in the UK," *Women's Studies International Forum* 47 (2014): 233, doi: 10.1016/j.wsif.2014.06.010

3. David Keane and Nicholas McGeehan, "Enforcing Migrant Workers' Rights in the United Arab Emirates," in *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 15 (2008), doi: 10.1163/138548708X272537