INTRODUCTION
When trying to manage international migration, an underlying goal of policy planners and governments is to ensure that such migration occurs in an “orderly, safe, regular, and responsible” manner. The Sustainable Development Goals for 2015–2030 specified the above as a specific target, number 10.7 (UN, 2015). The Global Compact for Migration adopted by several countries in 2018 reaffirmed the above commitment (UN, 2018). Despite such policies and good intentions, irregular migration continues to persist all over the world and was increasing prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, most likely due to the restrictive policies of receiving countries and continued demand.

COVID-19 and threats to irregular migrants in Kuwait and the Gulf

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Abstract
Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Gulf region was home to ~29 million foreign residents, an estimated 20–40% of whom were residing there in an irregular status. Most of them had skilfully devised strategies to survive in this irregular situation, with friends and relatives acting as essential support networks. The COVID-19 Pandemic suddenly disrupted this well-established social order. This article outlines the lived experiences of 26 irregular migrants residing in Kuwait when the Pandemic occurred. Twelve of our interviewees were planning to leave in response to the amnesty declared on 1 April, while 14 were planning to stay or were uncertain. Network support continued to provide an essential element in enabling their survival. Intermediaries such as kafeels (sponsors) were often unavailable or unwilling to provide assistance. The health and welfare of irregular migrants require special policy attention since they now face an enhanced risk of being apprehended and deported.
for out-migration in sending countries. It has been estimated that irregular migrants constitute ~15%–20% of all international migrants or ~30–40 million individuals worldwide (OHCHR, 2014; UN ILO, 2015; ). It is expected that irregular migration will increase further in the post-Pandemic period (Chamie, 2020).

The Gulf region that constitutes a major recipient of migrants in the world is no exception and is estimated to contain ~15% irregular migrants among all migrants residing there in the early 2000s (Kapiszewski, 2001; Shah, 2009), and perhaps 20%–40% in the next decade or so (Fargues et al., 2017; Kapiszewski, 2001; Shah, 2009).

In 2020, the six Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) had a total population of 58 million of whom 30.1 million (or 51.9%) were non-nationals, that is, migrants (Table 1). The presence of foreign nationals in the population was ~90% in case of Qatar and the UAE, ~70% in the case of Kuwait, and 38% in the case of Saudi Arabia. Assuming that 20–40% of the migrants were residing in the Gulf in an irregular capacity, ~6.0–12.0 million persons were in this status. However, the true magnitude of this group remains unknown.

Gulf countries that are home to irregular migrants do not provide any systematic data on their number. Table 2 provides a summary of some estimates identified according to the type of irregularity the migrant faced in specific countries. It is obvious that the numbers fall within a strikingly wide range spanning from <100,000 to 2–3 million. As of June 2020, in Kuwait, there were 165,000 irregular migrants in the Ministry of Interior records (Minister of Interior speech on KTV1, June 4, 2020). A relatively fair conclusion enabled by the above is that the phenomenon of irregular residence in the Gulf is very widespread.

While research on irregular migration has been gathering in Western countries, it remains especially scanty in the Gulf region. Questions relating to the factors and situations that create and perpetuate the phenomenon of irregular migration remain under-researched and unexplored. Similarly, little is known about the lived experiences and coping strategies that irregular migrants devise to continue their existence and survival in these countries. Some preliminary investigations on the topic include Kapizewski (2001) and Shah (2009). A major contribution was made to this research by Fargues and Shah (2017) in an edited volume. Various authors in that volume showed that irregular migrants of many different types, and from several different countries, are present in each of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Previous research from the region shows that in the diverse settings of Gulf countries, a common feature shared by irregular migrants was a remarkable level of resilience that enabled them to survive skilfully in the host country through multiple strategies. That is, they were willing to suffer high levels of personal insecurity and a precarious existence in the face of many adversities. Some of their strategies were to learn Arabic and converse in it, expand their network of friends and acquaintances, and gain information about better employment opportunities. Reliance on network connections was found to be the lynchpin that held the irregular migrants’ survival together.

**Table 1** Total population and percentage of nationals and non-nationals in GCC countries (national statistics, 2020) (with numbers)

| Country (date)                | Total population | Nationals | Foreign nationals | % Nationals | % Non-Nationals |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Bahrain (17 March 2020)      | 1,501,635        | 712,362   | 789,273           | 47.4        | 52.6            |
| Kuwait (December 2020)       | 4,670,713        | 1,459,970 | 3,210,743         | 31.3        | 68.7            |
| Oman (12 December 2020)      | 4,471,148        | 2,731,456 | 1,739,692         | 61.1        | 38.9            |
| Qatar (17 March 2020)        | 2,846,118        | 328,985   | 2,517,133         | 11.6        | 88.4            |
| Saudi Arabia (mid-2020)      | 35,013,414       | 21,430,128| 13,583,286        | 61.2        | 38.8            |
| UAE (mid–2019)               | 9,503,738        | 1,244,638 | 8,259,100         | 13.1        | 86.9            |
| Total                        | 58,006,766       | 27,907,539| 30,099,227        | 48.1        | 51.9            |

Source: National Institutes of Statistics and author's calculations based on data published by National Statistical Institutes; extracted from GLMM website, Table 1.2.2; www.gulfmigration.grc.net
The inherent resilience typical of several migrants was often motivated by the very strong desire to earn, save, and remit money for dependents, especially among women. When the COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted the risky, but “normal” life of the typical irregular migrant in February–March 2020 many connections and structures that earlier supported their difficult survivals are likely to have been altered, almost overnight.

The main objective of this article is to arrive at a better understanding of strategies that irregular migrants were able to mobilize to cope with the changed circumstances and threats that the COVID-19 Pandemic is likely to have had on their lives. A related objective is to outline some policy interventions that may lighten the negative impacts on migrant workers.

The article is divided into the following five sections. We begin by outlining the economic and social context within which irregular migration to the Gulf occurs, and briefly discussing the policies and management strategies employed to handle it, such as declarations of amnesty. The second section presents a brief review of the relevant literature from other parts of the world regarding the lived experiences and coping strategies of irregular migrants. The third section outlines our methods for collecting information from 26 irregular migrants living in Kuwait during April–June 2020. The fourth section presents the findings on the lives of irregular migrants especially in terms of strategies to cope with the altered employment possibilities and risks. The final section outlines the major policy implications and conclusions of the study.

THE GULF CONTEXT OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND POLICIES TO MANAGE IT

As in other countries (Castles, 2004; Fargues, 2017; Menjivar & Kanstroom, 2013; Van Meetren, 2010; Vickstrom, 2014), rules and regulations of the host countries that allow entry, stay, and work participation of migrants are crucial determinants of their legal status in the Gulf countries. In the Gulf, four major structural features of the economy and society of the host countries are fundamental determinants of generating and sustaining irregular migrants, namely (1) the necessity of a sponsor (or kafeel); (2) the sale and purchase of work visas, or visa trading;
(3) the difficulty of transferring from one employer to another; and (4) the role that intermediaries play in enabling and sustaining irregular migration. Another factor that is shared by most sending countries consists of their policies to maximize outflows of workers who can send back remittances to contribute to the economy and reduce unemployment and poverty problems at home. Such policies are likely to indirectly enable irregular migration (Shah, 2017). As elaborated by Fargues, Bel-Air & Shah (2017) laws and rules of the Gulf countries, especially those inherent in the *kafala* (sponsorship) system underlie many forms of irregularity. For example, migrants must obtain a transfer paper from the *kafeel* to change their job, and they become irregular if they choose to take up a job without the sponsor’s permission. Also, the *kafeel* usually withholds the migrant worker’s passport and a worker may fall into irregularity if the sponsor fails to renew his residence permit. Thus, the migrant’s lack of agency and control over his administrative situation subjects him to the risk of falling into irregularity. Additional information on the above factors may be found in previous research by Abella (2018), Fargues and Shah (2017), Rahman (2015) and Shah (2009).

A few common characteristics of irregular migrants in the Gulf are noteworthy as shown by various authors in the volume by Fargues and Shah (2017). First, they are usually located in the private sector jobs, constituting ~70%–80% of the labour force in various Gulf countries. Second, they are typical of low-skilled workers. Third, women in domestic service seem to be especially prone to enter an irregular status. Finally, several of them tend to have bought the work visa which is unlawful for both the migrant worker and the Gulf sponsor who sold them the visa.

In terms of migration governance, the six countries share several features. The *kafala* system to manage and regulate migration is the primary means of hiring, employing, transferring, and firing workers. With rare exceptions, each worker must have a sponsor or *kafeel* who is responsible for his residency. All of them define migrant workers as temporary contract workers. None of the countries have policies to offer a path to citizenship, although some countries including the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have devised policies to offer long-term residence usually for highly skilled and professional categories.

In the early days of large-scale migration to the Gulf countries from 1970 to 1990, not much attention was paid by the GCC countries to curb irregular migration even though the rulers were aware of the practice and probably the scale. The presence of irregular workers was tolerated since it was beneficial for the economy and was very profitable for employers. Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, several concrete steps at reducing the number of non-nationals were taken, including serious attempts to curb irregular entry and stay (Shah, 2007). Authorities started launching police raids in residential areas known to house irregular migrants, as well as public places where they congregated and arresting them. Cases of visa trading also came to be recognized publicly and instances of punishments for such actions were reported in the media. In Kuwait, public statements about the need to reduce the number of expatriates became fairly commonplace, and some high-ranking officials were cited by the media to suggest policies to curb migration and encourage a balance between nationals and non-nationals. Rules regarding the retirement age were more strictly followed than before and issuance of new work visas became more restricted. It is likely that the tightening of the labour market led to an increase in irregular migration.

A major strategy adopted by all the GCC countries was to hold specified periods of amnesty during which an irregular migrant could either leave the country without any punishment or regularize his/her stay. The earliest amnesty declarations in the Gulf date back to the mid-1990s when Saudi Arabia and Bahrain declared amnesties for irregular residents. Approximately 700,000 migrants were deported from Saudi Arabia every year, and it was estimated that between 2.0 and 2.3 million migrants were repatriated or regularized between October 1997 and July 2000 (Shah, 2009). Following the Pandemic, several Gulf countries declared amnesties aimed at allowing irregular residents to leave without paying penalties and a promise that they could return in a regular capacity. The experience with past amnesties shows, however, that the response of irregular migrants to such programs is lukewarm, and less than half decide to leave or regularize their stay (Alsharif, 2017; De Bel-Air, 2014; Shah, 2014).
In response to the Pandemic, partial or complete lockdowns or curfews were instituted to prevent the spread of the infection. At the same time, some high infection areas that generally housed low-skilled migrant workers were cordoned off. In the case of Kuwait, for example, such as Jleeb AlShuyoukh, Mahboula, and Farwaniya stayed closed for two months, April and May, after the other areas were reopened at the end of April 2020. Some of the irregular workers who wished to avail the amnesty and were stranded were housed in temporary shelters, usually converted from school buildings, and given daily meals until their return transportation could be arranged.

In terms of providing appropriate testing, quarantine, and healthcare facilities, relatively little is known in other Gulf countries. In Kuwait, however, the migrants who applied to depart were checked for the Coronavirus at the Government centre by health officials and if positive were taken to a quarantine facility. Forty-five schools were adapted to house these migrants and to house migrants who had lost accommodation. Despite such arrangements, reports from several origin countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India showed that returnees from the Gulf seem to contain an exceptionally high number of infected persons, repatriated in contravention to the international norms. Pakistan reported that on some flights, as many as 40%-50% of the returnees had tested positive while the usual prevalence was 12% (Al-Monitor Staff, May 5, 2020). The Sri Lankan Health Minister reported that “Of the 466 who have returned from Kuwait, 330 tested positive for the virus”, and “150 of the 270 returnees from Qatar arrived as patients,” said Wanniarachchi (UCA News, June 1, 2020).

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The analysis in this article draws inspiration primarily from previous research that has focused on coping strategies and survival skills of irregular migrants in different countries. Several conclusions from other, mostly European and American, countries indicate similarity with irregular migrants in the Gulf while others indicate peculiarities specific to the Gulf region. We discuss three main aspects where the lived experiences of irregular migrants in the Gulf are similar to Western countries and two aspects where the former are distinctly different from the latter.

The first similarity relates to the agency of irregular migrants. An underlying theme in previous research argues that irregular migrants are not merely victims of their irregular status. However, the irregular status may be the "master status" that determines all other personal characteristics, according to Echeverria (2020). They exercise a fair amount of agency (Anderson & Ruhs, 2010; Bloch & Chimienti, 2011; Castles, 2004; Cvjner & Sciortino, 2010; Echeverria, 2020; Ellermann, 2010; Gasana, 2012; Van Meeteren, 2010, 2012). Migrants find creative ways to adapt to their irregular status in many ways. They devise counter-strategies to combat rules and regulations aimed to eliminate them and find ways to adapt to new conditions (Cornelius & Salehyan, 2007; Fernandez, 2017; Pande, 2017; Schweitzer, 2017; Stavilă, 2015). Düvell (2006, 2011) contends that irregular migrants are often individualist and entrepreneurial, being highly responsive to labour market needs and more mobile than indigenous populations. According to Engbersen and Broeders (2009), irregular migrants react to exclusionary policies of host governments by adopting three types of strategies: going from formal to informal work; shifting from legal to criminal activities and from identifiable to unidentifiable status.

Irregular migrants in the Gulf present many similarities to those in the Western countries cited above. Different studies in Fargues and Shah (2017) reported that migrants find many ways to skilfully survive in potentially hostile environments where they often face a high degree of risk to be arrested and deported. For example, Jureidini (2017) reported that migrants to Qatar were not necessarily hapless victims of fraud and exploitation; many were well informed about the risks involved in the move but chose this path to support their families at home. Similarly, Mahdavi (2017) found among her interviewees in Dubai and Abu Dhabi that irregular migration was viewed by several as more lucrative, empowering, and safer. Shah and Al-Kazi (2017) also reported that some migrants found irregular migration to provide higher remuneration and a greater amount of flexibility in their employment possibilities. Thus, irregular migrants present pictures who demonstrate a high degree of entrepreneurship combined with resilience to face difficult circumstances in the host country.
The second aspect of similarity that is repeatedly noted as a facilitator of irregular migration consists of network support (Ambrosini, 2012, 2016; Chavez, 1991; Cornelius & Salehyan, 2007; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2009; Engbersen et al., 2006; Gasana, 2012; Massey et al., 1998; Matting, 2018; Van Meeteran, 2012). Ambrosini (2012) identified eight types of resources that irregular migrants can access, network support being a major one. Networks promote and organize the arrival of unauthorized migrants and provide various kinds of help according to self-interest and closeness of familial and other ties. Thus, social capital is a crucial factor that initiates and sustains irregular migration. Networks assist in finding a job, providing or sharing housing, and providing psychological support. Thus, a successful irregular stay is often "contingent upon the availability of people in the receiving country willing to face some risks on behalf of the irregular migrant" (Cvajner & Sciortini, 2010, p.399).

The third aspect of similarity relates to the facilitation of irregular migration provided by intermediaries. Ambrosini (2017) outlines the actions that various intermediaries can take to prevent or hinder the state policies aimed against irregular migrants in Europe. Reasons for support may range from economic exploitation of newcomers to "bounded solidarity" among people in the same harsh circumstances to moral obligations towards family members (Engbersen et al., 2006). People smugglers, co-ethnic brokers, employers, and NGOs are examples of such intermediaries (Ambrosini, 2017). In Israel, it was found by Kemp and Raijman (2014) that the actions of private brokers, seeking profit, were an important factor in catalysing trafficking in combination with government regulations.

In the Gulf countries, intermediaries consist of formal as well as informal actors. A fundamental difference in the nature of such intermediaries is that the process of finding and arranging a Gulf job is routed through recruitment agents who are generally licensed by the countries of origin in several cases. However, there are numerous unlicensed agents and sub-agents who supplement the work of licensed ones. Furthermore, they link the arrangements for hiring and placements between home and host countries. However, this category of intermediaries facilitates the job for a fraction of all migrants, the other facilitators consisting of informal helpers such as friends and relatives, or natives of the same home town. While intermediaries play an enabling and sustaining role, they can be an integral party to migrant exploitation by arranging visa trading. The migrants in many Asian countries end up in high levels of indebtedness resulting from exorbitant interest rates accrued from loans obtained from money lenders to finance the move and buy the work visa (Rahman, 2015; Shah, 2000).

The extent to which irregular migrants can get incorporated in the host country differs markedly between Western countries and the Gulf. A fundamental reason for this is the fact that Gulf countries in fact consider migration as "worker mobility" that is by definition temporary, with no path to citizenship. The term "migration" is not used in official writings. The experience of irregular migrants in some Western countries, on the other hand, allows "personal incorporation", where migrants begin to perceive themselves as part of the host community and develop sentiments of solidarity with the new society (Chavez, 1991). Schweitzer (2017) describes the process of "self-integration" of irregular migrants in the UK when they start behaving like others and by "becoming everybody". The above type of personal incorporation is not possible in the Gulf for any migrants, regular or irregular, due to a deep segmentation of the society, as described by Longva (1997). However, a somewhat different kind of incorporation with one's own countrymen is often visible through the functioning of active networks.

Another major difference between Western and Gulf countries consists of the inability of irregular migrants to demonstrate active resistance, unlike that noted by Chavez (2007) in the case of undocumented migrants living in France, Spain, and Switzerland who initiated demonstrations to demand regularization of their status. Possibilities of activism and resistance were also pointed out in the case of migrants to the USA by Menjivar and Kanstroom (2013). In the Gulf, no migrant workers are allowed to form labour unions or hold organized protests or strikes. Irregular migrants are essentially defined as criminals, subject to arrest and deportation if apprehended. The only accommodative response by the state has been periodic declarations of amnesty during which the irregular migrants may either leave the country without any penalties or regularize their status, as described earlier. Rare instances of strikes by migrant workers have been reported from the UAE and Kuwait, but these protests are often squashed immediately.
The above review indicates that several of the survival strategies of irregular migrants residing in the Gulf are similar to those in other parts of the world. Such migrants are not passive victims of their circumstances and sometimes enter the irregular status to eke out the greatest economic benefits from their Gulf stay. Optimal use of network connections enables them to survive in a potentially hostile environment. Various intermediaries play important roles in enabling and sustaining their survival, sometimes to their detriment. The lack of an eventual path to citizenship in the Gulf is a fundamental factor that minimizes irregular migrants’ agency for long-term settlement and personal incorporation in the host country. However, the Gulf stay in an irregular status can span many years, even decades. Given the above context, we explore in section 4 how the COVID-19 Pandemic may have threatened the usual skilful survivals of irregular migrants, using examples of 26 such persons residing in Kuwait in April–June 2020.

DATA ON 26 IRREGULAR MIGRANTS GATHERED DURING LOCKDOWNS

Information from 26 irregular migrants present in different areas of Kuwait at the onset of the lockdowns in March 2020 was collected in a primary, qualitative study. A purposive sample was used for the identification and selection of cases. These migrants consisted of males and females whose residency visas had expired, or they had run away from the sponsor and did not have any valid residency papers, or were working for some employer(s) other than the person who sponsored them.

A listing of the 26 sampled cases is given in Table 3 according to major characteristics of respondents including their nationality, gender, occupation, duration of residence in Kuwait, the amount paid to arrange the job, and plans to return home. The sample included different nationalities, namely Indian, Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Egyptian, and non-Arab African. The inclusion of different types of migrants enabled us to analyse the experience of a relatively large cross-section of workers in Kuwait.

The data were collected during the partial and total lockdown from April to June 2020 in Kuwait. To have access to the cases, one of the authors contacted friends in the Indian community who were helping the irregular migrants. They connected the author to a number of them by telephone. It was difficult to know the whereabouts of irregular migrants. The first challenge was how to identify and locate these migrants, especially in the sudden health crisis that arose. The second challenge was to convince the contact that the study is purely academic and would not present any threat to the participants (Düvell et al., 2008). Many of them were afraid of being reported to the authorities and the contact was an important source of reassurance, as they trusted her and the aid group. Furthermore, many of these workers have their own network, and once assured of their anonymity and safety, they led the author to others. Another source was Facebook for the Egyptian and Nepalese communities and from those pages, contacts were made by getting phone numbers.

To ensure that the collection of data followed ethical guidelines, the subjects were informed verbally at the start of the interview of the purpose of the study and anonymity was ensured. We assured the respondents that the information they provided would not be reported in any way that puts them in danger or identifies them. Since the subjects were residing in Kuwait illegally talking to the researcher in their own language, gave them reassurance. A verbal agreement was taken, and subjects were told that they could stop whenever they felt uneasy about the questions. All names listed in Table 3 are fictitious and do not enable the reader to identify the subject.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to gather information. As interviews were conducted in three languages (Hindi, Arabic, or English) the wording of questions was flexible and allowed clarifications to be made by the interviewer (Berg, 2009). The focus was on permitting the interviewee to tell his/her story rather than answer a series of structured questions (Ryan et al., 2009).

The author who conducted the telephone interviews is fluent in all three languages and was, therefore, able to choose the language in which the respondent was most comfortable. Telephone interviews were recorded after getting the consent of the interviewee since the interviewer was unable to visit the localities because
| Name (not real) | Nationality | Sex | Amount Paid for Move (USD) | OCC. | In Kuwait Since | Type of Irregularity | Planning to Leave? |
|----------------|-------------|-----|---------------------------|------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Zubeida        | Indian      | Female | 1,288                     | Domestic Worker | 2008             | 1                   | No                |
| Sarah          | Cameroon    | Female | None                      | Domestic Worker | 2018             | 1.3                 | No                |
| Norah          | Ivory Coast | Female | None                      | Domestic Worker | 2016             | 1.3                 | No                |
| Ahmad          | Egypt       | Male  | 3,129                     | Hotel coffee maker | 2018          | 2                   | No                |
| Ali            | Egypt       | Male  | 1,001                     | Taxi driver; now small jobs | April 2019  | 1.2                 | No                |
| Mohammad       | Egypt       | Male  | None                      | Construction    | 2012             | 2                   | No                |
| Khalid         | Egypt       | Male  | ?                         | Car rental     | 2010             | 2                   | No                |
| Rajoo          | Indian      | Male  | None                      | Farm worker    | 2007             | 1.2                 | No                |
| Taslima        | Bangladesh  | Female | None                     | Domestic Worker | 1999            | 1                   | No                |
| Basel          | Syrian      | Male  | None                      | Car maintenance | 2010            | 1.2                 | No                |
| Leela          | Nepalese    | Female | None                      | Domestic Worker | 2005            | 1                   | No                |
| Ratan          | Indian      | Male  | 1,765                     | Steel fixer    | Sept. 2016       | 2                   | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Riazul         | Indian      | Male  | 1,737                     | Cleaner        | 2015             | 2                   | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Arun           | Indian      | Male  | None                      | Domestic Worker | April 2018  | 3                   | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Biren          | Indian      | Male  | 1,604                     | Carpenter      | March 2018       | 2                   | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Deepak         | Indian      | Male  | 1,604                     | Carpenter      | 2018             | 2                   | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Masud          | Indian      | Male  | None                      | Domestic Worker | April 2018  | 1.3                 | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |
| Pankaj         | Indian      | Male  | 2,005                     | Farm work      | 2014             | 1.3                 | Yes, APP<sup>c</sup> |

| Name | Nationality | Sex | Amount Paid for Move (USD) | OCC. | In Kuwait Since | Type of Irregularity | Planning to Leave? |
|------|-------------|-----|---------------------------|------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Vasant | Indian | Male | None                     | AC Tech. | 2017            | ?                   | Yes               |
| Kuldeep | Indian | Male | 1,337                     | Construction | 2017       | 2                   | Yes               |
| Manav  | Indian | Male | 3,342                     | Construction | 2017       | 1                   | Yes               |
| Rajesh | Indian | Male | 1,337                     | Cleaner/farm worker | April 2019 | 2                   | Yes               |
| Name       | Nationality | Sex  | Amount Paid for Move (USD) | OCC.         | In Kuwait Since | Type of Irregularity | Planning to Leave? |
|------------|-------------|------|----------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Mary       | Nigeria     | Female | None                       | Domestic Worker | 2017           | 1                    | Yes               |
| Meena      | Nepalese    | Female | None                       | Domestic Worker | 2005           | 1                    | Maybe             |
| Ayub       | Bangladesh  | Male  | ?                          | Cleaner       | 2005           | 2                    | Maybe             |
| Wahida     | Indian      | Female | 1,932                      | Domestic Worker | Feb 2020       | ?                    | ?                 |

Note: ? Information not available

a One US dollar (USD) equals 74.8 Indian rupees, 0.31 Kuwaiti Dinars, and 15.98 Egyptian pounds.
b Type of Irregularity is defined as follows: 1 = Kafeel/employer different; 2 = Overstayed valid visa or no valid papers; 3 = Runaway or absconder.
c APP means applied for amnesty.
many were cordoned off or a curfew was in place, and face-to-face interviews were not possible. For the purpose of validity, a pilot test was done and the opinion of two professors of Demography was taken on the question guide.

**RESULTS: THE LIVES OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The general composition and characteristics of the 26 irregular migrants we interviewed during the lockdown were as follows. Fourteen were Indian nationals and the rest had different Asian and African nationalities. Eight were women, 6 of whom were domestic workers. Twelve of the 26 (46%) had bought their work visa for coming to Kuwait, all of them paying more than 1000 US dollars, and some as much as 3,342. Eight had been living in Kuwait for more than ten years. Twelve of them were planning to leave, of whom 7 had taken active steps by applying to their embassy for the necessary papers; while 11 had no plans to leave the country, and 3 were uncertain about their plans.

In the following analysis, we examine the lived experiences of our interviewees in terms of the agency and survival strategies they were able to mobilize in face of the new situation and understand why some decided to leave while others did not. We assess whether intermediaries and kafeels were supportive or punitive, and the extent to which informal networks of friends and relatives continued to assist in the survival of irregular migrants.

We first describe the experiences of migrants who are planning to continue living in Kuwait despite the risks and problems they faced. The case of Zubeida who came from India in 2008 is reflective of the situation of some freelance domestic workers, an unknown number of whom live and work in Kuwait. She narrated her experience as follows:

I came to Kuwait twelve years ago. After arriving, I paid 400 KD (USD 1,290) to an agent in Farwaniya for the visa to work as a khadama (domestic worker) in Jahra for three years. After three years, I took tanazul (transfer). From then onwards, I bought my visa for 350 (USD 1,190) KD from a Kuwaiti sponsor every year. I was working part-time in many different homes. Since March, I have no work. After the lockdown was announced, people stopped calling me. They said it was too risky, and they wanted to follow social distancing. Since then, I have no job, no salary, and therefore no money to pay for rent and food. I now live on charity. I hope things will get better soon.

Unlike Zubeida's experience, some other freelance domestic workers seem to be coping better with the Pandemic. For example, Sarah who came from Cameroon to Kuwait in 2018 has managed to find alternative part-time jobs and skilfully avoid apprehension by the police. Sarah told us that:

After 7 months of working at the house, I escaped from the house due to a high workload. I had long working hours and no weekend break. I live with some African friends and rent a partition (subdivision in an apartment) for 60 KD (USD 193) /month. Before the lockdown, I was working as a freelancing house cleaner and earned about 2KD (USD 6.4)/hour. After lockdown it was hard for me to go to my regular clients for housekeeping so, I started working in a supermarket near my apartment as a cleaner as well as stocking the new items on the shelves for 4 KD/day. After full lockdown ends I will go back to serve my clients. My residency status is still valid and the police never stop me because when I go outside, I always wear a maid's uniform and the police do not pay attention to me. Now I don't have a financial problem and I do not want to go back to my home because I must support my family. My plan is to find a job in a saloon, but I do not know how I will transfer my residency.
Like Sarah, Norah from Ivory Coast is not planning to leave Kuwait and has found a creative way to survive. She came to Kuwait in 2018 on a domestic worker visa, ran away from her employer after two months with the help of friends and started working as a part-time cleaner. This is how she was coping when interviewed:

After lockdown, I started a small home business to cut the meat and chickens into slices and make them ready to be grilled by a restaurant. I am planning to keep working until I get caught by the police. I will never leave if she can earn money because I must take care of my son and parents back home.

Among the Arab males, we interviewed almost all were planning to remain in Kuwait. The four Egyptian nationals were all facing problems with their sponsors who had refused to renew their visas or give them transfer papers prior to the Pandemic. Some had filed court cases of “absconding” against the migrants. Ahmad's case reveals the fraudulent promises made by the intermediaries and the Kuwaiti kafeel. Ahmad was told in Egypt that he would earn a basic monthly salary of KD 190 (USD 612) as a coffee maker in a hotel and was charged 50,000 Egyptian pounds (USD 3,129) for the work visa, which he paid by borrowing money. Ahmad said that.

Once I arrived in Kuwait, I stayed for 1 month without work, no residency, no Civil ID, and the owner did not answer me. ......I finally found him and started to discuss the issue. The result is that he can't hire me, and he told me that I can work as a security man for 70 KD (USD 225), 16 hours per day 6 days per week ... I accepted, but now he refuses to give me a release paper or renew my residency that expired on January 20.

Rajoo, an Indian national who came to Kuwait in 2007 to work as a cleaner in a house, does not plan to go back either. His sponsor did not treat him well and he left the sponsor and found work as a farmhand through friends. His sponsor filed an absconding case against him and he has not left the country since 2011. He does not want to leave since he said that:

If I leave as an illegal I cannot come back to the Gulf, and will not have any income in India. I have not seen my ten-year-old daughter but cannot go---

In the case of Taslima, a Bangladeshi part-time cook working in Kuwait for over 20 years, family support has been a critical element enabling her to continue living in the country during the Pandemic. Taslima told us that.

I worked for a Kuwaiti family as khadama (domestic worker) for two years and then got tanazul (transfer). Since then I buy my visa for KD 550 (USD 1771) for two years. I had many employers before lockdown. I am a single woman and my brothers live with me who help with paying the rent....

The case of a Syrian national, Basel, who came to Kuwait as a legal migrant in 2009 is especially problematic. He came on a legal work visa as a car mechanic but had problems with his sponsor who refused to give his passport. So, Basel escaped and started working with the help of friends. He cannot get a new passport from the Syrian embassy in Kuwait since in his original village in Syria some of his relatives are known as protesters. Thus, Basel concluded that:

I have two options either to leave Kuwait illegally and go to Syria or leave for Europe or Australia with a fake passport and discuss my case with their government.

For our interviewees who were planning to leave, a possible route for such an exodus in Kuwait was to avail of the amnesty declared on 1 April 2020, for one month to ensure the speedy evacuation of all irregular migrants in the
country. The response to the amnesty call in Kuwait was massive. In the case of Indians who form the largest number of foreign residents numbering ~1.45 million, 45,000 irregular workers decided to avail the amnesty and leave the country without paying any fines (Laskar, 1 May 2020). Further relaxation in amnesty and residency rules was announced on 2 July 2020, in Kuwait to facilitate those who had violated residency rules after 1 January 2020. All of our interviewees had been in an irregular situation prior to the above date and could not benefit from the relaxed rules.

Of the seven migrants who had taken active steps to leave Kuwait, some were employed in construction-related jobs, while others were general helpers or domestic workers. All of them had applied to the Indian Embassy for the issuance of a travel document, termed by migrants as a "white passport" that was still awaited at the time of interview. The experience of Ratan, a 45-year-old Indian male is illustrative of the above predicaments that many of these migrants shared. Ratan said that:

I arrived in Kuwait in Sept 2016 as a steel fitter. I paid an agent Rupees 1 Lakh and 32 thousand (USD 1765) for the visa. The company asked us to work on a bridge with unhealthy fumes. We protested. The Company got angry and terminated the services of 20 workers. Now I had borrowed a considerable amount of money to pay the agent for the visa at a high-interest rate. It would be impossible for me to pay the moneylender once I went back home. So I left the company and worked on small jobs. When the Kuwait government announced an amnesty, I wanted to go back. I applied for a white passport but received it in June. I have had no work since March. I have no money for food or rent. The landlord is asking me to leave. I can live on khuboos (bread) and water, but cannot live without a roof above my head.

In some cases, the migrants’ life plan had been jeopardized because of misinformation about the wages they would earn, leading them to the decision to leave once the amnesty was declared. In the case of Biren, a carpenter, who came to Kuwait in March 2018, after buying a work visa for Rs. 120,000 (USD 1,604) and incurring a heavy debt to arrange it, was faced with the above situation. He narrated that:

My agent told me that I would be paid 1KD (USD 3.2) per hour of work and that the Company would give me 300 hours of work. This would allow me to send 72000 Rupees back home to my family, but once I arrived in Kuwait, my friends and I were made to sign a contract in which we were paid 1 USD for an hour of work. I was able to make only 250 USD in 250 hours of work. I was able to send just about Rs 15,000 home.

Almost all the migrants had been living in Kuwait for at least two years prior to the Pandemic, except Wahida, a female domestic worker who came in February 2020 and had paid 600 KD (USD 1,932) to buy the visa. Her case is especially problematic since she did not have any opportunity to process her residency papers prior to the Pandemic. Availing any kind of amnesty might be financially devastating for her. She was surviving on the basis of network support that had arranged her move in the first place and was uncertain about her plans.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We can conclude the following from our analysis of the lived experiences of the 26 migrants we interviewed in Kuwait. In response to the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic, we found mixed coping strategies and plans. Less than half were planning to leave and only 7 had taken active steps to do so. Some had quickly found alternative employment by using their existing network connections. Others were jobless but were managing with help from friends and relatives and were not planning to leave since they were hopeful the situation would improve. Others continued to work at small jobs to earn a living and survive. Thus most were not helpless
victims of the Pandemic but had been able to exercise their agency and devise counter-strategies to exist, similar to examples from many different countries mentioned earlier (Cornelius & Salehyan, 2007; Schweitzer, 2017; Stavila, 2015). Most of our respondents had been in the country for several years and had lived in an irregular status for a good part of that, enabling them to devise strategies to face difficult situations. The lockdowns posed additional challenges that made their lives harder, but a majority was planning to stay in the country despite this by harnessing their individualist and entrepreneurial skills, similar to the findings by Düvell, (2006, 2011). Thus, skilful survival strategies continued to be adopted by several while others could not face the deepening threats and decided to leave.

Factors that facilitated, or impeded, the decision to stay were as follows. First, the role of friends, relatives, and members of the migrant’s network remained crucial in providing a safety net for the successful survival of migrants during the lockdown and influenced their decision to continue living in Kuwait, as found in several previous studies from different countries (Ambrosini, 2012, 2016; Gasana, 2012; Massey et al., 1998; Matting, 2018; Van Meeteran, 2012). Networks of friends and relatives continued to provide support by sharing rents, food, and lending psycho-social assistance. However, as the situation continues longer and the irregular workers fail to find employment such support is likely to wane.

Second, the irregular status of migrants was maintained through a collusion of the Kuwaiti sponsors with the migrant workers through the sale of work visas and allowing the worker to be employed by someone other than them. The relationship of collusion was, however, beginning to erode in many cases after the lockdown.

Third, employers and intermediaries remained key actors in generating the irregular status through mistreatment and misinformation. It was relatively easy for employers to lodge a case of absconding against a worker who left because of unfavourable and difficult working conditions, or non-payment of wages. Most had run away from their sponsor due to non-payment of wages, mistreatment, or violation of the terms of the contract. A majority had been promised higher wages than they were given upon arrival. While the migrant worker could approach the court against the employer, the Kuwaiti employer’s power far outweighed that of the migrant worker, and winning for the latter was difficult. Several in the above situation had borrowed large sums of money for their move and to buy the visa and were forced to continue living illegally in Kuwait to earn an income despite the difficulties being faced in the lockdown. The experience of some interviewees showed that little help was available from “kafeels” some of whom had already filed a case of “absconding” against the worker prior to the Pandemic. In the case of those working irregularly in far-flung areas such as farms or campsites, the kafeel was especially unreachable. Thus, the role of kafeels and intermediaries was more adversarial than helpful during the post-Pandemic phase. The situation was especially precarious for those who had outstanding wages and had left their employer due to non-payment. They will be unable to leave until they collect their dues and may need to survive in very difficult conditions, aggravated further by their irregular status.

Given the above conclusions and discussion, the following policy interventions may be highlighted. We found that the high cost of recruitment continues to pose a major difficulty for migrants who often borrow large sums to buy the visa that reduces the potential benefits of the move, as reported in previous research (e.g., Amjad et al., 2017). Additional efforts by sending as well as host countries are required to reduce or eliminate these costs. As part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world governments, it has been agreed that the recruitment costs incurred by the migrant as a proportion of the yearly income earned in the country of destination must be contained (SDG 1.7.1). It is likely, however, that in the post-pandemic era, recruitment costs may in fact increase due to the continued mismatch between the seemingly unlimited supply of labour and the shrinking demand for such labour. Sending countries have been faced with an unprecedented high number of returnees who lost their jobs in the Gulf. With the dismal economic situation at home, the pressure to find overseas jobs may increase further.

Sending countries are also facing pressure from the Gulf countries to repatriate their citizens, including the undocumented ones. For example, the UAE had sounded a warning, asking various countries, including India, to repatriate its citizens who wished to return. They had categorically said UAE will review labour relations with countries that fail to do so to the extent that they could curtail labour quota for such countries in future. Under these circumstances,
repatriation from UAE had gained priority in the Gulf region (Siddiqui, 5 May 2020). During the process of repatriation, it is important to ensure that migrants are not forced to leave without collecting any wages that may be outstanding. Some of our interviewees could not avail the amnesty even though they wished to leave since they had not been paid by their employers and could not afford to leave since this would entail a financial disaster for them.

In case of workers who decide to leave or are deported, host countries must ensure that they do not send back unvaccinated or sick individuals as was found in the early days after the Pandemic when travel was restored. Also in the case of those who continue to reside in the host country, irregular status should not act as a hindrance to obtaining vaccination and necessary health care if sick.

In the long run, factors that underlie the emergence and perpetuation of irregular migration should be addressed and removed. Among these, the continued structure of migration that depends on the kafala system and on agents and sub-agents must be reformed, as suggested by many researchers (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Kamrava & Babar, 2012). Also, the difficult process of transferring from one employer to another needs to be made easier. Some Gulf countries have taken steps towards these goals but the major features of the kafala system involving the sale and purchase of visas through a whole range of intermediaries still persist, especially in the case of low-skilled workers.

Thus, the COVID-19 Pandemic revealed and amplified many of the structural problems leading to the presence and perpetuation of irregular migration to the Gulf. The inherent advantages that facilitated such migration are expected to get minimized in the near future. However, it is hard to imagine that the Pandemic will mark an end to irregular migration. Social networks will continue to be under pressure to facilitate jobs for friends and relatives in future. Employers would again seek the flexibility of hiring irregular workers for ease of business and maximization of their profits. A wide range of intermediaries who have well-established connections in the home as well as host countries will eventually be rejuvenated. As long as visas are available for sale, buyers will be there; the price of such visas may increase further. Thus, the SDG goal to reduce recruitment costs for workers may in fact be negated in future. A critical factor that will determine the above is the health of the Gulf economies and a revival of their grand plans for growth and development. Preceding the pandemic, the intention to limit migration had been a part of the policies implemented by most Gulf countries. Such intentions have gained momentum in the post-pandemic period in some countries such as Kuwait that has already passed legislation to achieve the above goal (Almulla, 2021). In the meantime, sending country economies will face additional challenges to accommodate the unexpectedly large number of returnee migrant workers, as well as the ones who were in the process of recruitment that may not mature anymore (World Bank, 2020). The factors that push migrant workers to seek overseas employment under risky and illegal conditions may in fact gain more momentum. Whether migration to the Gulf will become more orderly, safe, and regular in future is an open question that only time will answer.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data were collected by the authors and some details may be shared upon request.

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